

A vibrant anime-style illustration of a wedding scene. In the center, a young man with brown hair in a dark blue suit with gold embroidery and a white bow tie stands next to a young woman with long pink hair and blue eyes in a pink dress with a white collar. They are both smiling. In the background, three other women are visible: one with long blonde hair in a purple dress, one with brown hair in a green dress with a white bow, and one with long white hair in a teal dress with her hands clasped. The setting is outdoors with a large building in the background, orange flowers in the top left, and yellow and red flowers in the foreground. The title is written in large, pink, bubbly letters at the top right.

CAN SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON?!

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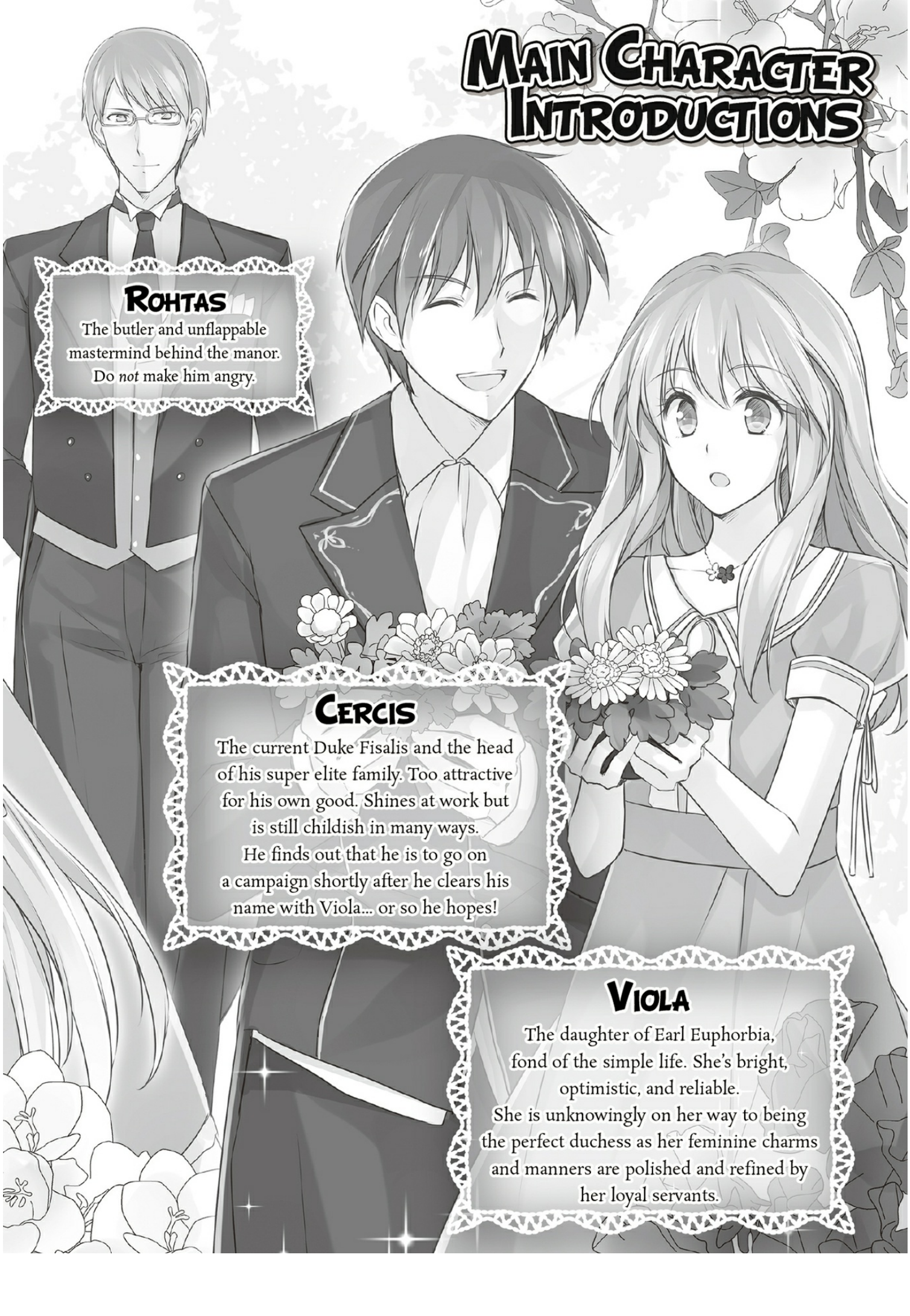
-A Sign-on-the-Line
Wedding Story-

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VISIT...

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MAIN CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS



ROHTAS

The butler and unflappable mastermind behind the manor.
Do not make him angry.

CERCIS

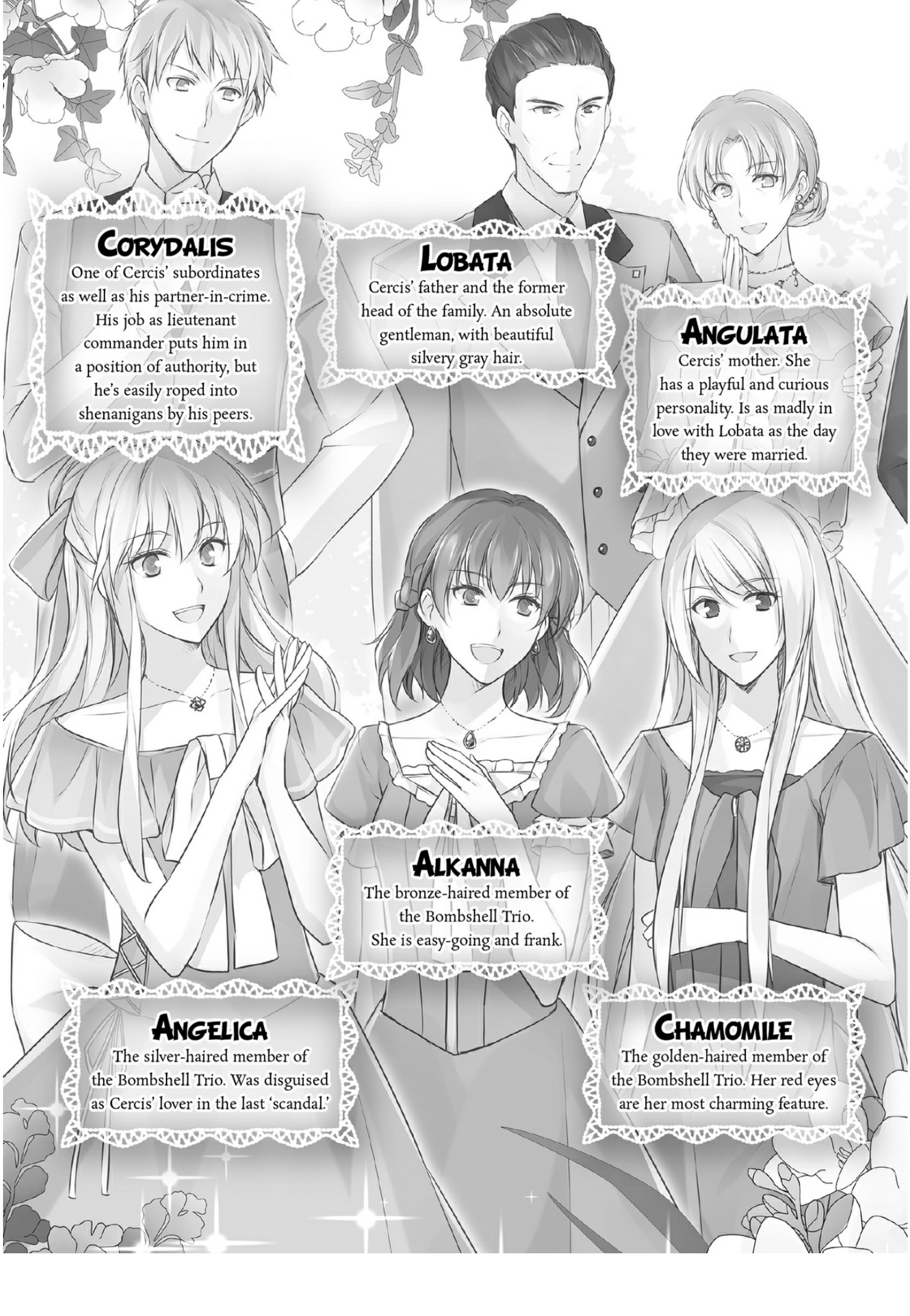
The current Duke Fisalis and the head of his super elite family. Too attractive for his own good. Shines at work but is still childish in many ways.

He finds out that he is to go on a campaign shortly after he clears his name with Viola... or so he hopes!

VIOLA

The daughter of Earl Euphorbia, fond of the simple life. She's bright, optimistic, and reliable.

She is unknowingly on her way to being the perfect duchess as her feminine charms and manners are polished and refined by her loyal servants.



CORYDALIS

One of Cercis' subordinates as well as his partner-in-crime.

His job as lieutenant commander puts him in a position of authority, but he's easily roped into shenanigans by his peers.

LOBATA

Cercis' father and the former head of the family. An absolute gentleman, with beautiful silvery gray hair.

ANGULATA

Cercis' mother. She has a playful and curious personality. Is as madly in love with Lobata as the day they were married.

ALKANNA

The bronze-haired member of the Bombshell Trio. She is easy-going and frank.

ANGELICA

The silver-haired member of the Bombshell Trio. Was disguised as Cercis' lover in the last 'scandal.'

CHAMOMILE

The golden-haired member of the Bombshell Trio. Her red eyes are her most charming feature.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Character Introductions](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1 — He's Going on a Campaign](#)

[2 — Chocolate Temptation](#)

[3 — Let's Get Ready](#)

[4 — Out and About](#)

[5 — The Dessert Party](#)

[6 — Two Families Under One Roof](#)

[7 — A Narrow Escape](#)

[Idle Asides, No. 1, Cercis' Perspective — The Undercover Operation](#)

[8 — Correspondence](#)

[9 — The Reply](#)

[Idle Asides, No. 2, Cercis' Perspective — A Long-Awaited Reply](#)

[10 — A Return to Normal](#)

[11 — Showing Restraint](#)

[Idle Asides, No. 3 — My Delightful \(?\) Correspondence with Mr. Fisalis](#)

[12 — The Significance of the Sacks](#)

[13 — A War Has Begun](#)

[14 — Plans for the Day](#)

[15 — I Managed to Get Ready and Nothing Went Wrong](#)

[16 — Good News](#)

[Idle Asides, No. 4, Cercis' Perspective— Cercis' Dream Romance](#)

[17 — Socializing for Beginners](#)

[18 — Off to the Royal Palace](#)

[19 — Once a Wallflower, Now a Rose Among Daisies](#)

[20 — A Little Dissatisfied](#)

[Idle Asides, No. 5, Cercis' Perspective — On the Frontlines](#)

[Idle Asides, No. 6, Cercis' Perspective — The First Cavalry
Company's Moment to Shine?](#)

[Extra Scene 1](#)

[21 — About to Come Home](#)

[Idle Asides, No. 7, Cercis' Perspective — Mr. Fisalis' Division
Returns Home](#)

[Extra Scene 2](#)

[22 — His Return Home](#)

[Side Story: Scenes from Following Duchess Fisalis on Her Date](#)

[Side Story: Blow Your Worries Away!](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

“I have to leave for a campaign soon.”

Following a sudden, unexpected uproar over an apparent new mistress, Mr. Fisalis quite literally swept me away into the night, allowing the other knights and our butler, Rohtas, to show me that I was mistaken and to dispel my doubts. There was no new mistress at all, just Mr. Fisalis and his division conducting undercover work. What a relief that was all over with!

We were in the carriage on our way home when Mr. Fisalis broke the news of his upcoming campaign over muffled clacking and creaking sounds as the carriage rocked gently over the road.

A campaign, not a business trip. It's just one different word, but I'm feeling so uneasy over it.

“A campaign? Not one of your regular business trips?”

“Yeah. This will be a campaign. And a long one, at that.”

“For... how long?”

“At the shortest, one month. Longest... I don't know. That's why I couldn't stand the thought of leaving you with this misunderstanding still between us. I wanted to leave without having to worry about what you thought of me, and everything ended up getting rushed.”

Maybe it was the grim line of his mouth or the way he was more solemn in that moment than I had ever seen him before, but something about him made me anxious. Unsure of what to say, I gazed at him as he remained equally silent for a moment before continuing.

“You don't need to look so surprised. Trust me, I swear I'll come home. Just promise you'll be waiting on my return,” he told me with a soothing, gentle smile.

I would have forgotten that we had that conversation, except that our marriage of convenience—I mean, our contractual marriage—had been otherwise rather void of emotion. How could he say those sappy lines with a

straight face? Did he think we were lovey-dovey newlyweds? We were long past that point.

Mr. Fisalis wanted a fake marriage so he wouldn't have to break up with his long-term girlfriend and love of his life (*life* being the operative word), Miss Calendula, and I, in turn, was drawn into this marriage by the promise that he would take on my parents' debt. Our goals were perfect matches for each other, so we entered a marriage of convenience. Besides, it wasn't like we were deeply in love or anything!

Granted, it never felt like a tragedy or some grim decision. I knew my chances, and I knew what I was: a four among tens (both on the outside and the inside), the daughter of a penniless earl. I'd made my official debut into high society, yes, but we didn't exactly have cash to spare and parties were generally a pain to boot, so I very rarely went out after that. You couldn't even really call me a proper young lady at that point, so it was no surprise when marriage proposals didn't exactly come flooding in.

I was on the precipice of the unthinkable (for a lady of means, anyway): convincing myself that I didn't need a husband! That I was more than capable of enjoying my life as a strong, independent, *single* woman! When, out of nowhere... a marriage proposal finally arrived.

I couldn't help but wonder whose idea of a joke it was, asking *me* of all people to marry them, when to my disbelief, Father told me that it was Duke Cercis Tinensis Fisalis, the son of one of the wealthier noble families of Flür and a man of unparalleled beauty and celebrity.

...His offer had also come with a "be my show wife so I can continue seeing my girlfriend who is terrible for me in every way imaginable" clause. All I had to do was accept that clause and my beloved parents would be free of their debt. It was no wonder then that, true to my nature, I didn't hesitate to sign.

And with the flick of a pen, we got married (or should I say 'we concluded our negotiations?').

My new husband took little notice of me and didn't think much about his manor, either; I feared a pathetic life in the shadows awaited me. But as it turned out, what was actually waiting for me was a delightful new life as the

lady of the house.

Under the watchful eyes of the manor's wonderful and highly capable servants, I earned my stripes as something of a servant myself as I helped with the daily dusting, washing, and gardening! (Huh?) I-I, of course, I'm learning proper social etiquette, too. You know, because I'm a lady. Rohtas hasn't let up with his torturous dance lessons, and I never know what to expect with Dahlia's etiquette lessons, so those always help to keep me on my toes. And thanks to my maid, Mimosa, and her Spa Squad, my skin has never been smoother and my my hair has never been glossier. And since I'm basically living a servant's life, I usually wear a servant's uniform, only occasionally transforming into a duchess☆

Or at least, that's what it feels like some days. At any rate, I've adapted to my new life in the duke's manor.

I never missed Mr. Fisalis while I was relaxing in the servants' dining room or eating with the servants on my breaks; in fact, it was as if I had died and gone to heaven!

The next thing I knew, however, Mr. Fisalis had gotten into an argument with Miss Calendula and broken up with her. I couldn't believe it. I mean, hadn't he married me precisely because he was in love with her? He didn't stop with just cutting things off with her, either—he even went so far as to actually amend our contract. I thought you were supposed to stick to the original wording with contracts!

Once he had broken up with Miss Calendula, Mr. Fisalis started paying *a lot* more attention to me. But instead of being happy with his sudden about-face in behavior, I was mostly just confused. He started taking me on dates that really just served to show off his status and giving me expensive clothes and jewelry... It was like he was doing everything he could to push me out of my comfort zone. I guess you could say everything he did was a major turn off to me, but however you slice it, it was really... strange, honestly.

Around that time, Mr. Fisalis also realized something wasn't right and asked Rohtas and my closest maids, Dahlia and Mimosa, what sort of things I liked. It seems like he put in a lot of hard work to learn more about me. It made me kind

of happy to hear that.

After that, we survived one of Rohtas' dance lessons together, Mr. Fisalis and I, and then he was very understanding when I broke a pricey vase, even helping me find a replacement. As we slowly started to spend more time together, I came to realize that there was more to him than I'd thought and then that moment in the carriage happened, and I discovered he wasn't as indifferent to me as I'd thought.

But when a rumor of a new mistress started to circulate, I just assumed he was back to his old tricks! But this time, Mr. Fisalis really went all out to dispel the misunderstanding, going so far as to nearly leak classified information to me. His actions in that moment made me want to overlook his past transgressions. Er, rather... The whole mistress scandal was really just him and his division at work. Sorry about that, Mr. Fisalis! My bad.

And it was with all this new information spinning around in my head that I sat there dumbstruck in the carriage while Mr. Fisalis gazed fervently at me. Just as I was starting to feel so much closer to him than I did in the early days of our marriage, he told me that he was leaving for a campaign. Everything just felt... different. The way he looked at me, the anxious heaviness in the air.

It's all starting to make me a little nervous!

1 — He's Going on a Campaign

"I'll be returning to the south," Mr. Fisalis told me.

We were in the salon back at the manor. He'd asked for privacy, and now even Rohtas was nowhere to be seen.

Back in the carriage, we'd seemed to come to a mutual conclusion that we shouldn't talk too much there about his campaign, so we'd switched the topic to something more lighthearted for the ride home. Besides, we couldn't be sure who on the street might overhear us. In the confusion of having that news broken to me and then suddenly changing topics, however, I had completely forgotten what we were talking about.

For many reasons, then, home was indeed the best place to talk about it, one of them being that the manor was practically an impenetrable fortress of secrets!

Mr. Fisalis returned to his earlier explanation after making himself comfortable on the sofa and letting out a soft sigh. He was looking at me from where he was sitting at my side, leaning away from me.

That can't be good for your back. Isn't it harder to talk that way? Why not sit across from me, I thought to myself, wondering why he had sat down next to me when there was another huge sofa across from me. It was a perfectly comfortable sofa, that other one, and yet he was still glued to my hip. Well, technically there was still considerable space between us, but why did he want to be so close to me all the time? It came as quite the surprise, even though I had become somewhat used to his habits.

Maybe he's sticking so close to me to keep Cartham away? That pesky chef can't cling to me if he's already clinging. Oh well, that's a question for another time.

I think I mentioned it before, but Mr. Fisalis' work is top secret. So even when he told me where he was going for business trips, it was always vague—just like earlier when he'd said where he was going for the campaign. The fact that he decided to let me in on where he's going, even if it's just giving me a general

idea, suggests that he thinks of me as family!

...Well, actually I guess the fact that he told me about—or rather, took me to his secret base (or whatever that was)—was already proof of that.

“To the south, you say?”

“Yeah. The situation down there has gotten tense. We’ve been keeping an eye on it for a long time now,” he explained simply.

Come to think of it, he has been pretty busy lately with all his business trips and cheatings— I mean, meetings. Secret meetings. And I’ve seen him on several occasions reading official papers looking really grim, too. And since I’ve never been privy to the details of his work, I’ve just ignored the whole subject. Let it blow right by me like a gust of wind, so to speak.

But the capital was like the embodiment of safe and sound. You never heard about wars or skirmishes anywhere; it just wasn’t that kind of place. Even our gossipy tradesman never mentioned anything like that, nor was there any lack of supplies coming into or going out of the city. There were no signs of unrest anywhere, and yet...?

“Really? I had no idea.”

No matter how I looked at it, the world seemed to be carrying on as normal, so it was hard to believe what Mr. Fisalis was saying all of a sudden. I must have looked confused, because he said then:

“That’s understandable—the situation hasn’t been made public yet. The only ones who know currently are the military and the government’s top brass.”

He said it all very casually, but it made me shiver to hear such dire news! *Way to share the burden with me... No, that’s no way to think. Pull yourself together, girl.*

“So this is an actual campaign, right? Not a business trip.”

“Er, well. It looks like there’s been increased activity in that area lately, and considering what we’ve already gathered from intel...”

“Does this mean there’s going to be a war?” There had always been frequent skirmishes near the southern border, but since it was far from the capital, and I

didn't personally know any soldiers headed off to fight, I wasn't really informed. Moreover, since skirmishes were a common occurrence at the border, the citizens here weren't all that worried. In fact, it didn't seem like they cared at all.

Oh, but it was one of those fights at the border that had delayed our wedding! It seemed like that kingdom to the south was always starting something. That was big news, so even I'd heard about it. They certainly are hot-blooded down there. *What troublesome neighbors we have! Can't they find some other way to let off steam? Maybe they could use all that energy to power machines?*

... Okay, I don't know if that's actually possible.

...Nevermind, there are more important things to think about now.

"It's hard to tell at this stage. Still, it looks pretty likely, and that's exactly why we're going."

I assume Mr. Fisalis' unit is going there to gather more information, and then control what gets out to the press based on what they find.

"Oh, okay."

"That's also why I don't know for sure at the moment when I'll be able to come back. In a month, at the earliest. Probably," he said, casting his gaze to the floor. Based on how he sighed, it didn't seem like he was eager to spend time away from home.

A month-long campaign sounded like back-breaking work. I could not imagine that he would find a four-course dinner— Ahem, all of *everyday life's wonderful blessings* wherever he was headed. Mustn't forget my family's motto: extravagance is the *real* enemy. If it was me being sent to some remote location, I bet I'd be just fine with the food. Still, he was probably in for a rough time, considering that silver spoon in his mouth wasn't going to get much use. Thoughts and prayers.

"Will your work be difficult?"

"Yeah. If we're stuck down there for long, anyway... but I don't know how long we'll be out there. It might end up like it did when we were supposed to

get married.”

“I sure hope not!” That did sound like extremely tough work! It made we want to sigh, too.

Perhaps ruminating over what was to come, Mr. Fisalis’ handsome face was colored with anxiety. His downturned eyelashes were so long I could make out the trembling shadow they cast over his cheekbones!

He must have been under terrible pressure, knowing that the fate of the kingdom rested on the shoulders of his division. But I was always hearing how good he was at his job (mainly from the Bombshell Trio)! Everyone under him was the cream of the crop, too, so I was sure they would succeed!

Clenching my fist, I stared back into his eyes and rallied my spirits. For some reason, he chose right then to cover my clenched hand with his own.

“Viola, I’m trusting you to look after the place while I’m away. Keep everything nice for me, for when I come back,” he said firmly as he gazed back into my own eyes. The grim set to his jaw and glint in his eye as he said it were almost breathtaking. I was losing myself in them. He said it while looking right at me...

Hold on there, Mr. Fisalis. You’ve been away this whole time, and yet you’ve only just now noticed who’s been running the place in your absence?!

I was *this close* to saying that out loud. I literally had to cover my mouth to keep the words from spilling out. I can’t be sugar, spice, and everything nice, all the time ☆ I took a deep breath (or maybe ‘swallowed my anger’ is a better way of putting it) and calmed myself.

“But of course! I’m not alone, after all. I’ve got Rohtas, and Dahlia and Mimosa, Bellis, Cartham, and everyone else, so I’m sure I’ll be fine. We’ll *aaaaall* look after the manor!”

He stared back in silence.

“I won’t be lonely, I mean. So don’t worry about me, focus on your work instead!” I promised him, hoping my smile looked more ‘you can count on me’ than ‘who do you think you’re talking to?’



Was it just my imagination then, or did Mr. Fisalis look like he was holding back tears? The fact that he still managed to look hot when he was about to cry made me want to cry myself.

Should I try one of my twenty dollar smiles? Will that make him feel better?

He looked at me for a second with those sad, tear-soaked eyes. And then, as if he was suddenly filled with glorious purpose (and I, filled with shock), he proclaimed:

“Damn it! I can’t let this turn into some drawn-out battle! I’m gonna do whatever it takes to wrap all this up as quickly as possible, so please! Wait for me!”

The feeling that we might have actually been having a moment flew off into space when his entire mood did a one-eighty and the steely gleam returned to his eyes. I could barely keep up with his pace.

What the heck, Mr. Fisalis? What just happened?

I could do little else but gape up at him.

2 — Chocolate Temptation The day after he confessed that he would shortly be leaving for a campaign in the kingdom across our southern border, Mr. Fisalis wasted no time going straight to work at the palace, then coming straight home. Granted, I thought that he should have gone out for drinks with his coworkers every now and then, and that his frantic rush to and from work wasn't necessary.

To be completely honest, it was keeping me from having my dinner with the servants. Er, I mean, part of his job as the leader was to show his gratitude for everyone's hard work and to provide an opportunity to air complaints and then smooth things over. I was about to try to explain this to him, but his mouth moved faster than mine.

"We all get along fine. There's no issues. Moreover, the most important mission right now is communication at home, much more than at work! Ah, speaking of work, did I ever mention that I don't do patrols or anything for my job? So communication isn't actually that big of an issue! I'm either stuck in a palace office or at the training ground," he all but blurted out in his excitement.

He had me at the first half, but I had no clue what he was going on about by the end. Could he have picked up on my earlier confusion about where he could have found the time to visit a mistress? Whatever the cause, I had an inkling that my time with Mr. Fisalis was about to experience a drastic increase.

Several days later: Mr. Fisalis had come straight home from work, as per his new norm, and had stopped in his room.

"Dahliaaaa? Mimooosa? Where could those two have gone? I guess Rohtas is

with Mr. Fisalis.” I was sure they’d been with me a moment before when I had gone to greet Mr. Fisalis.

I had been waiting in the salon while Mr. Fisalis went to get changed, but now Dahlia and Mimosa were nowhere to be found. I figured Rohtas was with Mr. Fisalis in his room, but where had my maids gone? I couldn’t recall them ever leaving my side like this before.

A different maid had been with me that day in their place, so I tried asking her.

“Dahlia and Mimosa, Madam? I believe Master called for them, and they went to his office with Rohtas. They should be back soon, though—if you don’t mind waiting, that is,” was all I got in response. *So he summoned them to somewhere I can’t see, did he?*

“Oh, I see. Thank you for telling me.” *What could the four of them be scheming? I guess I don’t really care, though.*

She then led me to the main dining room, and as we were waiting, Mr. Fisalis came in, accompanied by Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa. *Hmm, what have we here?*

Rohtas pulled out a chair for Mr. Fisalis, who then sat down, signaling the start of dinner. Servants briskly marched the food into the dining room. What they brought out from the kitchen wasn’t the usual lavish feast, but perfectly reasonable portions for the both of us. Mr. Fisalis didn’t make a peep.

Dinner that night was a light affair made with vegetables from the Ledeau region. I couldn’t help but lick my lips and chuckle to myself at the long-awaited sight of food that couldn’t possibly upset my stomach. When I happened to glance over at Mr. Fisalis, despite the vast distance between us—by which I mean the massive dining room table—I got the impression that he was in a very good mood, as if he was quite pleased with something.

He’d probably just say ‘I don’t know what you mean,’ if I asked, but whatever the reason, his smile was sparkling about three hundred times brighter than usual. I unintentionally made eye contact with him as I inquired anyway about his uncommonly cheery disposition. *Crap, he’ll realize I’ve been staring at him. He’s going to think I’m some kind of weirdo.* I quickly looked away, but my poker

face was nowhere near good enough to fool him!

He smiled gently at me when he caught me red-handed.

“What is it? Something on my face,” he teased in good fun, snickering at me.
Oh, crumbs.

“Oh, no, not at all. I just noticed that you seem to be in a really good mood.”

“Ah, you think?” he replied, like he thought I’d said something funny.

“Huh? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Uh huh. Well, whatever the reason, I’m glad you noticed,” he said with a sweet smile and little tilt of his head. His smile was so sweet that it made me feel warm, like molasses. So sweet that it felt like it was going to rot my teeth. These sweet smiles were just play-acting earlier, so by that point I was fed up with — Ahem, I’d had quite enough sugar for one day, but when he flashed that particular smile at me...

“Oh, okay...” Just as I started to feel like I was getting heartburn, his smile turned a shade more ambiguous.

“I’ve been thinking about tomorrow... my day off, actually,” he said with an air of optimism.

Oh, that’s right, tomorrow is his day off. Mr. Fisalis’ work runs on a shift system so that the whole department doesn’t end up on vacation at the same time. He generally got one day off for every five days worked, so if he worked several days in a row, he’d earn several days off afterward. I hadn’t known this back when he had been living in the cottage, since we’d barely talked to each other, but ever since he had moved into the main house, I had little choice but to take notice.

...Okay, honestly? He just gave me a lecture there at the table.

So the next day was going to be his vacation day. *I see, yes, of course. How could I have forgotten?*

Ever since he’d started staying in the manor, it had seemed like his days had become a great deal busier, so he was probably due for some time off. Now that I gave it some thought, the day we’d had our dance lesson together had

been one of his days off. For him, anyway, the next day would be some well-deserved time to do nothing.

Mr. Fisalis did not seem to be aware that I'd rather spend my time keeping myself busy around the house, like I normally did.

"Tomorrow?" I asked, wondering why he brought it up out of the blue.

"Yeah. Do you want to go out again? It's been a while since last time," he suggested with a grin.

"...Go out..." I felt a vein in my temple throb.

A foggy memory rose out of the back of my mind like some creature from a deep swamp: our disastrous date.

You mean you want to drag me around to more luxury boutiques? You want to make me sick with overly rich food again? (Okay, to be fair, he didn't know about my stomach problem then.) I swear I could feel my eyes growing damp as the urge to beg him to please not take me on another date swept over me.

"Oh, I know just the place. I didn't take you to that confectioner's shop you wanted to go to last time. If you just want to go there, that's fine, but there's also this cute cafe next door, too. It's really popular." I guess he didn't see my watery eyes, or maybe he was just ignoring them—but either way, there was a sense of eagerness in the way he said it.

That gosh darn confectioner's shop!

The confectioner's shop of my dreams.

I don't know if we had run out of time or what on our last date, but he never actually took me there. Contrary to my expectations, we had ended up at a luxury boutique and jewelry store, and then he had dragged me to a fancy restaurant—and I had stuck out like a sore thumb at every one of them. Just thinking about that date made my stomach hurt.

And now he's at it again with the confectioner's shop! And there's a cafe next door, too, he says! Is this a trap? Or could it be some sort of lure?! He's got me good, though—hook, line and sinker!

I was feeling a bit light-headed, what with half my brain now reliving that

disastrous date, but I snapped myself out of it and began to formulate a plan to avoid a repeat experience.

“I’d be happy if you just brought me back something from that confectioner!”

He wasn’t going to trap me that easily, just by mentioning a candy store! I slapped on one of my meager twenty dollar smiles, hoping he would just go along with it (he had been very agreeable in the days prior), but there was something different about him that day.

“No, I couldn’t possibly do that. That cafe is dine-in only, you see—no to-go orders allowed. They have to be enjoyed on the premises.”

Is he smirking?

“Urgh...”

Shudder.

I couldn’t make up my mind.

With no hesitation to be seen, and seeming as though he could read my mind, Mr. Fisalis chimed in, “They’ve got this chocolate tart, you know, and they are *veeery* liberal with their use of the finest chocolate from the Rougy Principality. And then they garnish the crust with powdered sugar...” He didn’t hold back and laid it on as thick as he could.

Oh, heck.

What sort of psychological warfare is this?! (An over-the-top one, that’s what.) My resolution was crumbling under his attacks.

The Rougy Principality was a small kingdom along the northern border of the Flür Kingdom. They specialized in chocolate production, and Rougy-made chocolate was said to be the highest quality available on the market. In economic terms, it was their hero product. Perhaps that was the reason a pauper like me had never once tasted it; all I could do was drool over the sight of it through chocolatiers’ windows!

What, that wasn’t a very pleasant mental image, you say? My sincerest apologies.

And now he’s saying they use that chocolate liberally!

The sound of my gulping was audible through the silence.

The flavor of that chocolate was said to be beyond imagination. What a pity, then, that it was too fancy for me, and I couldn't even imagine the taste. Mr. Fisalis continued on, his words raining like blows upon my psyche.

"Their best seller even has chocolate shavings on top. And the shavings are so light and delicate that if you tried to take the pastry home, they would melt on the way. They're so fine, like snowflakes, there's just no way they could hold their shape over the journey home. That's why it's dine-in only," he explained to me, never breaking eye contact. I saw my own demise in those eyes. His finishing blow. The urge to agree was irresistible.

It's like his sweet smile has somehow turned... dark.

I couldn't look away from his deep brown eyes.

I... I want that chocolate tart!

"So what do you say? Want to give it a shot?" His eyes glittered temptingly.

Mmnph... dine-in-only chocolate tart... No! Cartham could make me the same thing if I asked! But then again, depending on where he got the ingredients, the flavor would be different... I'd never live it down if I went on another fancy date just for chocolate, though, I contemplated, obsessing over the tiniest details.

When I made the mistake of looking up at Mr. Fisalis, he only mouthed the word 'chocolate' at me.

Eurgh... dine-in only... I'll never get a chance to eat it if I never leave the house...

I had made up my mind. I'd weighed the odds.

"...I think I'd like to go..." I managed to squeak, not without a little resignation.

"Alright. Tomorrow it is. I can't wait!"

"Sure! ...oops!" We accidentally replied to one another at the same time.

Still, in exchange for my surrender, Mr. Fisalis blessed me with a wide smile. I still felt like I had been lured with a tasty treat like some kind of animal, though.

Lured by who?

By the guy who thought to get me to go on a date by tempting me with chocolate and is currently dabbing.

3 — Let's Get Ready

That's right. My pride was annihilated by a chocolate tart. But Mr. Fisalis just made it sound sooo good! An innocent maiden with a sweet tooth like myself stood no chance against its sugary allure! Even if it was just bait to get me to go on a date with him...

"But haven't you been busy lately? Wouldn't you rather relax at home tomorrow? We can go and eat sweets some other time, or I could go with Mimosa. You really don't need to go out of your way just for me on your day off." Not knowing when to give up, I continued trying to get out of our second date.

"That tart is only offered for a limited time. We can *only* eat it now. I was just thinking I'd like to try it myself, and I'd really like it if you went *with me*." The smile he gave me really was lovely, but the pressure that accompanied it was merciless. There was no ignoring the stress he put on 'with me,' either. It wasn't the first time I had thought this, but everyone in the manor (Mr. Fisalis included) really had a powerful smile game.

"Alright..." I folded like a lawn chair.

—

No sooner had I gone back to my room with Dahlia and Mimosa after dinner than Mimosa ran full speed into my dressing room and started going through my dresses with a discerning eye.

"Mi-Mimosa?" Her face said 'happy', but the aura she was giving off did not make me want to approach her, so I peeked in quietly around the doorway.

"Just thinking about what you're going to wear tomorrow. Master requested something 'like what the girls around town would wear, but that doesn't detract from her wifely sweetness,'" she said, her hands never slowing in their search for just the right dress.

When did he put in a request like that?! He sure knows how to play to Mimosa's strengths, though, if how excited she gets at the chance to dress me up is any indication.

“Huh? Can’t I just wear one of my normal, comfy outfits?” I asked her. I didn’t think the occasion really called for me getting all dressed up. I figured I could just wear something like what I normally changed into when Mr. Fisalis came home, or even something like the outfits I wore when he had a day off. I had about three outfits I really liked and rotated between them, but apparently none of them would do.

Mimosa shook her head, turned to me, and said, “ You can’t wear your regular clothes! Not that they aren’t absolutely adorable, but you need something with more *oomph* for a date! But something that isn’t too out of the ordinary for you either!” she said with much enthusiasm, but very little clarity. What exactly was ‘oomph’?

“I-I do? I’m usually so plain, though. Won’t it look weird if I’m dressed up? I really can’t wear some of my normal clothes?” *If she wants me to go with an ‘I woke up like this’ look, shouldn’t I just... go how I actually woke up looking?*

“What? You really have no idea of your own hidden charm, do you, Madam?” she said with an exaggerated sigh at my protestations. *I guess that’s what she really meant when she was shaking her head earlier.*

“In that case, why can’t I wear my normal clothes?”

“Shush, this *is* what you normally wear. Just you leave everything to me, Madam.”

“...Fine. You know I won’t argue now that you asked.”

“Exactly! We’re going to make you look great tomorrow!” she exclaimed, clenching her fist, a fire in her eyes.

Okay, but you still haven’t told me what ‘oomph’ is. And I still don’t understand why I have to put in so much effort. I looked back at Mimosa, feeling a little uncertain.

“It will all work out if you leave it to Mimosa,” Dahlia said as she patted my back. *That’s not why I look confused, Dahlia.*

“Really, though. My regular clothes should be more than fine... Oh, that reminds me. Could I have more of that medicine?” I looked to her, suddenly remembering the little paper sachets she gave me last time.

Yes, that wonderful digestive aid! Dahlia had me take some just before I'd left on my last date, and thanks to the extra dose I had taken along with me, I was able to stop my usual gastrointestinal terrorism before it even started.

I shouldn't have any problems if I use it again this time! We've probably run out of that medicine from the Royal Medicinal Herb Garden, but I'm sure some herbs from our own garden, carefully tended by Bellis, should do the trick.

"I can certainly give you some more, but I don't think you'll need it this time," Dahlia responded with a little snicker.

"Bwuh?!" That was the first time I'd ever seen Dahlia laugh like that, and I couldn't hold back the stupid sound that I made. It seemed like she knew something I didn't.

"Hee hee hee, I am quite looking forward to tomorrow," she giggled, her smile growing, while all I could do was stare back in stunned shock.

Thinking back on her smile, I was reminded of my first date. Her smile that time hadn't radiated the same optimism, but had instead looked a tad concerned. To the untrained eye, nothing about her seemed out of the ordinary, but she had secretly slipped me the extra sachet of medicine.

This time, however, something was different. Even Mimosa was going all out—but then again, it was literally her job to make me look pretty. If I remember correctly, last time Mr. Fisalis had told her to "pretty me up even more than usual," but this time he had asked her to make me a "lovely girl about town." It didn't seem like she had any intention of telling me exactly what she had discussed with him, but based on how she was grinning, she didn't seem worried. Somehow, that grin made *me* worry, though.

Last time, Mr. Fisalis insisted that "regular young ladies like these things" like it was common sense, but recently he's totally changed his trajectory and learned what I actually like. So he knows that much about me, at least! I guess it doesn't seem like I'll hate this date as much as the last one. I really did go out of my way to try to get out of it, though. Still, Mr. Fisalis is an actual celebrity around town, which means things might not go as I envision, so I'm going to lower my expectations just in case, I thought to myself, trying to be realistic while still remaining optimistic.

Alright! Come hell or high water, I'll make sure he takes me to that cafe! I won't stop talking about it until he does!

I'm waitin' for that cafe! Gonna eat some fancy chocolate tarts! I was cheering myself on inside, when:

"Well now, Madam, you must be tired after today. Why don't you take a bath and hurry to bed?" Dahlia prompted me, looking—and snickering—at me all the while like I was nuts.

Ugh, she's totally babying me. Then again, I am the youngest one in the house. That, and Dahlia's almost old enough to be my mother.

"Alriiiight," I obediently replied, leaving Mimosa to gleefully rummage through my clothes in the dressing room as I got ready for bed.

—

After a completely ordinary breakfast, I was dragged back to my room by a very exuberant Mimosa and her Spa Squad and before I could even get my bearings, I had been dressed for the day. I even got a quick spa treatment—'just a little something to get you ready before your big day,' she'd called it!

This seems like more than 'a little something.' Mimosa? Are you listening?

It was highly unlikely she'd heard what I was only thinking, but either way, I was buffed and polished to a nice shine by her ever-passionate Spa Squad.

My outfit for the day was a plain dress in a subdued shade of dusty rose. The skirt was a bit long, giving it a mature look, but the white collar and short sleeves kept it from looking too matronly.

"I'm not going to do anything with your hair today; we'll leave it down. I think your natural glossy hair is a much more beautiful tiara than any style or accessory!" Mimosa said as she combed my strawberry blonde locks even more carefully than usual.

Back when I had lived at my parents' house, taking care of my hair had been a real pain in the neck (literally—so much yanking!) since we hadn't had the extra time or means to devote to personal grooming. The treatment I got at the manor was a real game changer. Mimosa took care of my hair and skin

properly, and since I ate better, I guess the vitamins spread throughout my body, making my skin and hair more radiant and smooth.

“There, perfect! You look like nothing less than a stunning, well-to-do lady!” Mimosa said as I looked at myself in the mirror.

“Woooah! What a transformation!” I looked beautiful, but not like a pageant queen or something; not glamorous, but I was far from mediocre now!

“I know, right? Ugh, you’re so cute, I can’t take it! You’re going to drive all the guys wild! Not that Master would ever let some stranger run off with you, though!” she said absentmindedly, while I, meanwhile, cringed at the thought. *She really says the craziest things sometimes...*

“Ye-Yeah.”

“You really are that cute. Oop, let’s not keep Master waiting any longer,” she said with a strained smile when Dahlia motioned towards the clock. I left Mimosa in my room to gush over fond memories of brushing my hair and headed to the salon, where Mr. Fisalis was waiting.

When I got there, it seemed like he was all ready to go, reading some paper. He was wearing a white shirt and gray, slim-fitting trousers. He also had on a navy jacket with gold stitching and buttons. The ensemble was simple, but he looked very good in it. I was kind of jealous. It also happened that he was wearing the pieces we had bought on our last outing.

Come to think of it, I suggested a black shirt, too (if only to distract him), and I’ve seen him wearing that one as well, so maybe that means he actually likes them.

“Wow! You look great today, too!” The displeased look on his face vanished in a flash when he saw me and was replaced by a brilliant smile. Standing up quickly, he handed the paper he was reading to Rohtas and strode over to me. I still hadn’t wrapped my mind around how dang long his legs were. “Shall we be on our way?” he asked as he offered me his arm.

I often think about how effortlessly cool he looked escorting me like that. It’s like it just comes naturally to him.

I, on the other hand, found myself feeling somewhat intimidated by his

flawless smile.

Oh no. I don't know if I can walk with him down the street when he looks this good. I look like a total wannabe compared to him. People will throw rocks at me! It's too late to change my mind, but I don't think I want to do this anymore.

Numb and in shock at my sudden loss of confidence, I was startled when Mr. Fisalis nimbly took my hand and wrapped it around his arm himself. There was no escape now... eh, no. I mean, I was very flustered at having to make him resort to that.

"Have a wonderful time!" all the servants said in unison from the doorway as they saw us off.

Off I went out the door Rohtas kindly held open, my arm linked through Mr. Fisalis'. I wondered if we'd take the carriage again, even though it was not too far to the center of town, but the carriage was neither waiting at the carriage porch nor anywhere else.

Don't tell me we're going on horseback?! Please, no more horses... I panicked, but when I looked up at Mr. Fisalis, he seemed to read my thoughts.

"Oh, we're not taking the carriage today. Or going on horseback. We have plenty of time and we'd be walking around anyway, so I figured, why not just walk all the way there?" he said with a smile.

That was not the answer I was expecting. It looked like the day was going to go completely differently than I thought!

4 — Out and About

I was on my way into town, walking down the street with Mr. Fisalis. I felt like a proper lady of status promenading with a fine gentleman. And thanks to Mimosa's skills with a makeup brush and her eye for color, I was able to convince myself that I didn't look like an absolute potato standing next to Mr. Fisalis. I had nearly lost my nerve before we'd left, but I'd somehow managed to recover in time.

Not in any hurry, we strolled along leisurely, Mr. Fisalis synchronizing his footsteps with mine; then out of nowhere, a question flashed across my mind.

Is it even proper form for a man of his status to be walking alone in public? Not only is he an aristocrat, he's a prominent figure in the military as well—a VIP, you could say. He has a security escort with him even when he goes to work. Can someone like that really just wander around town with his wife in broad daylight? Even if he is a knight, wouldn't he be out of luck if we were spotted by a bunch of bad guys? I never particularly cared for traveling in that gaudy carriage, so it seems he's ceded to my opinion on that today, but I can't let him put himself at risk just to make me happy.

What a conundrum. I've got to do something.

An idea hit me, and you had better believe I dove in head first.

I know! I'll be his bodyguard! That always seemed like a cool job! I've just gotta keep on the lookout. I'll watch the streets like a hawk.

Bad guys always strike from behind, right? Oh, that guy looks suspicious. Oh no— Now everyone out here looks suspicious!

Mr. Fisalis noticed I was suddenly looking rather panicked.

"What's the matter? Are you tired already?" He stopped and gazed at me.

Arrrgh, am I what?! We literally just left. We're still in front of the Fisalis property. Not to mention I spend all day every day cleaning the whole house and have survived multiple dance lessons with Rohtas, I'm plenty fit, what are you implying you had best not underestimate me WHEEZE WHEEZE—

...It's neither the time nor the place to get this worked up. Chill yo butt, girl. We should know by now how much of an airhead... ahem, a caring man he is.

"No, not at all. I was just wondering if it's safe to be out like this without a guard or something..." I said, letting him in on what I'd been thinking. I didn't mention that I had taken it upon myself to be his new bodyguard.

"Ohhh, that's what's bothering you? If that's all it is, there's nothing for you to worry about. I won't let anything happen to you!" he assured me.

That's... not what I was getting at. It's not me I'm worried about. I'm not important like you.

"Er, I didn't mean me. I was talking about you!"

"Me? I'll be fine. Like I said, you have nothing to fear. I just want you to have fun," he replied, brimming with confidence.

I guess I should have expected an 'I can take care of myself' attitude from a knight! Worst comes to worst, then, maybe I should just consider running away!

We arrived in the center of town while I was mulling over whether I was really cut out to be a bodyguard. The area was mainly businesses, and you could expect big crowds on a daily basis. The streets were regularly patrolled by knights, so it was pretty safe. It seemed like the whole town was out that day, rich and poor.

I came here nearly every day when I still lived with my parents. We barely had any servants, so we had little choice but to do the shopping ourselves. I'm pretty sure this is my first time back here since I moved into the Fisalis manor.

My usual stomping ground used to be this little marché! I'm an old pro now, so leave any bartering to me! Oh, wait, we're not going there.

We had come to the high street area on our last outing, too, but since we hadn't taken the carriage, I was actually able to enjoy the scenery this time.

I bet 'window shopping' isn't even a word in his vocabulary. It's so fun, though.

Or so I had thought.

"Think of something else?"

“Huh?”

“Oh, you just looked like you were staring off into space. Are you tired?”

“What? No, I already told you I wasn’t! It hasn’t even been that long since we left! I was just thinking about how cute that shop over there is.”

“You want to go in?”

“Oh, not really. I just like window shopping and admiring the storefronts.”

“Ah, okay. Well, I don’t have any plans for the day, so do you want to just roam around and see what everyone’s selling?”

“I’d love that!”

And with that, to my surprise, we started walking window to window, admiring what the shops had to offer through the glass. After some time, I stopped in front of a florist. They were selling a variety of lovely flowers, the sort with no names just like the ones that used to grow in my parents’ garden.

This place wasn’t here six months ago.

It was such a cute shop that, even if I didn’t buy anything, I just had to check it out, especially since I had never been in there before. Among all the florists with more striking blooms, I got the impression that this one was different; it was simple and seemed more welcoming. The person working inside—maybe the shopkeeper—was a young woman about my age.

“What a lovely store you have! Is it alright if I look around for a minute?”

“Sure, let’s take a peek,” Mr. Fisalis agreed, stopping for a moment in front of the store to look at the flowers through the window. He held the door open for me and we went inside.

It seemed that the flowers were all wildflowers. Perhaps it was because they didn’t so much as have names, but the prices were very reasonable. I wasn’t sure they would be appropriate to use in public areas of the manor, but they would go great with the rustic style of my room. I considered taking some home, but...

I didn’t bring my wallet! I didn’t even have any spare change with me! How could I have left without it?! I couldn’t believe I would forget something as basic

as a wallet.

Mr. Fisalis must have seen the look of confusion wash over my face as it dawned on me what I had done, but he caught on quickly and asked with a smile, “So you like these? Which ones do you want?”

When did he acquire these telepathic powers? I mean, he’s not wrong. Erm... which ones would suit me best? These light pink ones, the red ones... And then I snapped back to my senses.

Is it right of me to make him waste his money on some little flowers? No!

“Ah, no, no. It’s fine. I just think they’re pretty, is all,” I replied, trying to show some restraint.

“Then why don’t we take some back for the house?”

The man was always in the mood to buy things!

“But I didn’t bring my wallet or anything.”

“If I buy them, then you won’t need your wallet, right?”

We had bickered before, he and I, but this time, something about him felt different.

“Why don’t we buy these seedlings, and we can plant them in the garden? They’ll brighten it up, and we’ll be able to enjoy them for many seasons to come. That way we’ll get our money’s worth,” he proposed. It came as such a surprise to me that I did a double take.

What was that? ‘Get our money’s worth’? I didn’t think that phrase was in his vocabulary, either!

I blinked in shock. He seemingly took my silence for agreement and grinned before turning to the shopkeeper.

“I was wondering if you had this, that and, oh, that seedling in stock?”

I looked at the seedlings he pointed out—they were all so lovely—and began to figure out which ones he was going to buy.

“Oh, er... yes, we do!” the woman called, having returned to reality with a high audible *crack* after getting lost in Mr. Fisalis’s eyes.

“Alright then, I’d like five of each sent to the Fisalis estate,” he said, getting down to business without further delay.

“Yes, sir.”

And before I knew it, we had our receipt and were being told to “come back again!”

“M-Mr. Fisalis!”

“What?”

I had objected to him wasting money on me, but with just a flash of that gorgeous smile, my anger completely evaporated. It was probably his first time buying something from a humble street corner shop, so I guess he was enjoying himself. No, I’m sure he was—his smile said it all.

There was no point protesting now that he had already bought the seedlings; plus, the satisfied look that bloomed across his face was worth so much more than a few plants. So I stopped worrying about it and hopped off the doorstep onto the sidewalk, ready to head to the next destination. He made me really happy, actually, buying those flowers for me.

“Thank you,” I told him honestly.

“Not at all. Say, I know of this bakery that just opened. Their bread is delicious, but I hear they’re best known for their sandwiches. The line gets really long at lunchtime, so let’s get there early,” he said, taking the lead.

I didn’t know where he’d heard of it, but sure enough, there was a lovely little bakery complete with terrace seating waiting for us when we got there. It was brand new, just as he said, but since I had been out of the loop for half a year, I hadn’t heard about it yet. We were a little early for lunch, but decided to eat there anyway.

We were seated right away, presumably because we had made it in before the lunch rush. But then I saw that the place was already quite full, both inside and on the terrace.

We were right to come early. And, wow, the food here must really be something if there’s this many guys here! I feel like these kinds of places are

usually more popular with women.

“I’ll just get whatever, but you can have anything you’d like,” he said, looking over the menu as he motioned to a waiter.

The sandwiches that arrived a little while later looked A-MA-ZING. We had some made on croissants, pain de mie, as well baguettes. What excited me the most, though, was that they were undeniably ‘commoner food’! Before me were not dishes crafted with the most exquisite ingredients available, but exceedingly ordinary sandwiches with rustic ingredients that were sure to not stir up any trouble in my stomach! Mr. Fisalis smiled when he saw how happy I looked.

“Everything looks so tasty!”

“It sure does. Let’s dig in.”

“Thank you for treating me!”

Those simple sandwiches were like little pieces of heaven to me. I wondered, though, how they had the same appeal to Mr. Fisalis’ refined palette, but when I peeked up from my plate, my eyes met his.

“This is delicious!” he exclaimed. “It’s not at all what Cartham makes, but it’s still really good,” he noted softly. *Looks like it got his seal of approval.*

All in all, he wolfed down around eighty percent of what we ordered, with twenty percent for me. And not only did I feel totally fine at the end, but everything was absolutely delicious! I couldn’t have been happier.

—

“Oh, here it is! That confectioner who uses that famous chocolate I was telling you about,” Mr. Fisalis said. When I looked where he was pointing, I saw a shop with apple green walls. As he led me over by my hand, I could smell a sweet aroma wafting around the perimeter of the shop. The scent alone made my heart go pitter-patter in anticipation.

The store name was spelled out in gold lettering on a white background; all together, the business appeared very chic. You could see the rainbow of treats arranged neatly in the glass case even from out on the street.

“Oh, goodness! What a wonderful confectioner’s shop! I bet everything is delicious!”

We hadn’t even gone inside yet, and it was already everything a girl could ever dream of: sweet aromas and enticing cakes and cookies just out of reach. *But it’s not like I let him lure me here!*

At first glance, it looked pretty crowded inside, even though there was no line outside. Even our servants knew both this shop and the bakery quite well and had warned us beforehand about their busiest hours, so today must have been our lucky day!

“I wonder if we can go in after the crowd thins a bit. Let’s find out,” said Mr. Fisalis before he opened the door and went inside in search of an employee. I followed behind him.

“Do you have any tables for two?” he asked an employee who passed by.

“For two? Er, yes, looks we do. Right this way,” the lady replied with a smile as she turned to lead us over to the empty table she’d spotted.

“We made it! Looks like we got here just in time.”

“I know, look how busy it is,” Mr. Fisalis responded happily.

The lady showed us to a table adjacent to a window through which we had a good view of the flower beds in the park. *A lucky day indeed! What a great seat.*

When I happened to glance out the window, I noticed a line had formed outside the shop. There were even people we’d seen at the bakery in line. It seemed like we weren’t the only ones who thought that a sandwich and some dessert made for a nice date. *Gosh, that line really formed out of nowhere! Today’s so lucky, maybe I ought to buy some lottery tickets!*

When a waiter came to take our order, as I’d expected Mr. Fisalis asked for the eat-in-only chocolate tart and a tea that would pair well with it. Within minutes, a tart covered in finely-grated, fluffy chocolate, and two cups of steaming, fragrant tea were brought to our table. I understood then why the tart could not be eaten outside of the store: there was no way that chocolate wouldn’t melt into a puddle after too long.

Even just cutting myself a slice of the tart, moving carefully so as to avoid blowing away the chocolate shavings, felt like Nirvana. *I've never been more grateful to have married rich! ...Wait, what? I think I'm getting a little overwhelmed by the sight of that tart and the scent of that tea before me!*

As I looked out at the flowers in the park, through the steam billowing up from my cup, I met the gaze of a pretty woman sitting with a man at the table across from us. She radiated a sense of calm, and the slender, bespectacled man with her looked intelligent. I wondered if they were a couple. Her eyes widened slightly in surprise when our gazes met, but she collected herself quickly and smiled back at me. She had impressive bordeaux-hued eyes. Her voluminous golden hair was loosely pulled back into a braid that fell down her... *Wait a sec. I know that hair.*

"...Doesn't she work with Mr. Fisalis...?" I mumbled, unsure myself. Despite my soft voice, Mr. Fisalis' sharp ears heard what I said.

"Huh? Does who work with me?" he mumbled back, following my gaze. "Hm, could it be? Chamomile!" he yelled in surprise no sooner than his eyes had settled on her blonde hair. Judging by his reaction, my sense of déjà vu hadn't been wrong.

"Oh, Commander! How unusual, seeing you here," she replied with an amused smile, swapping her composed demeanor for one of languid skepticism. It was obvious she was questioning his motivations.

"What do you mean 'unusual'? ...Oh. Figures."

"Figures?"

Mr. Fisalis mumbled something and nervously looked away from her. I could only blink mutely, unable to hear what he had said, but also found myself looking anywhere but at her.

...She wasn't the only one of Mr. Fisalis's subordinates in the shop that day.

"I'm on a date with my hubby, here..."

"Me, too."

"Oh, what do you know—same here."

“My, what a coincidence ☆”

“Ha ha...”

All three members of the Bombshell Trio from Mr. Fisalis’ special division were there. Their apparent surprise seemed fishy, but they really did seem to have their husbands with them.

Yes, it wasn’t just the ladies there that day. When I took a good look around, I first noticed Corydalis, and then all the other men from the unit.

“We all just wanted to try the eat-in-only desserts they serve here, but when we heard how crowded it gets, we thought ‘why not make a reservation for the lot of us.’ Then we figured, if we were going to do that, we might as well guard the commander and his wife on their date, too, right?”

“We didn’t need you to guard us.”

“Oh, don’t be like that.”

“Tsk, but why today, of all days? You could’ve made the reservation any other day.”

“No, actually. We all simultaneously came to an agreement that we might as well do it today, since Mr. Important would be here.”

“Who’s ‘Mr. Important’?”

“You!” Corydalis explained in sheer delight to Mr. Fisalis, whose face only grew more and more sour.

All the knights had been sitting stiffly in the chairs and keeping an awkwardly formal distance between one another, but once they noticed us, they suddenly crowded together, making everything feel like one big party.

“Now that you’re here, Madam, please, help yourself!”

“No, really, have whatever you want! What looks good to you? Let us know!”

“It’s just that we rarely ever all get together like this. What do you think of here as an alternative venue for a tea party? They have a huge selection of teas here, so we could totally have a tea party here, too! You know, they even serve alcohol that goes well with sweets. Maybe you’d prefer that?”

“Oh, wow! Thank you so much, everyone! But I’ll pass on the alcohol!” I was completely walled in by beautiful women, yet again. Before me lay a spread of all the available sweets at the shop; around me, a selection of some of the prettiest women I knew. I was positively tickled pink! Er, I mean... I certainly didn’t mean to hog all of their attention. Mr. Fisalis was standing right beside me, but they didn’t so much as look at him.

Oh well, I really couldn’t complain.

5 — The Dessert Party Between the popular confectioner's shop and all the pretty women (whom I was quite literally "between"), I was having the absolute time of my life. Perhaps it was the sadness, then, of knowing that I couldn't possibly finish all of the cakes and goodies on the table that made me feel like biting a handkerchief. Of course if I did that everyone would think I was some weirdo, so I valiantly resisted the urge. But just know that I felt that torn.

For the time being, my mission was to finish everything on my plate, at least, for to not clean one's plate was a mortal sin in my eyes! Er, but... since I wouldn't be able to eat anything else anywhere if I devoured all those sweets, I choked back my tears and threw in the towel. My regret (although to be honest, it was closer to self-hatred) must have been palpable, because Mr. Fisalis slipped through the wall of women around me and said with a smile, "This all looks like it tastes amazing, but I really don't think you can eat all that. You only have to eat what you think you'll like, Vi. I'll eat whatever you don't. We can take home anything that's left afterward and give it to the servants."

Did my ears deceive me? Did Mr. Fisalis really just say that?

I did a double take, shocked beyond words at what had just come out of his mouth.

I only have to eat what I want?! And then he'll eat whatever I leave?!

As overjoyed as I was to hear him tell me that, a more rational voice in my

head said, "Hold up. Think about what he said just now."

That's right. This a complete about-face in attitude from him. Before today he totally would've said "just leave whatever you don't finish for the waiter to throw out!" So what made him change his tune to "I'll eat whatever you don't" and "we'll take the rest home to the servants"?

Between what he said in the flower shop earlier and what he said just now, what sort of mental revolution could possibly be taking place inside his head? And what was with that secret meeting he had with the servants yesterday?

In any case, none of this seemed like things he would normally say and, blinking, I realized what was happening as I stared at him.

"Vi?"

"Madam?" I snapped back to reality at the sound of my name and title, then saw both Mr. Fisalis and all the lady knights staring back at me in confusion.

"Oh, uh, yes! Sorry, I was just so happy that I kind of spaced out! Ah ha ha!"

"Oh, okay. That's good to hear. Let's dig in, then," Mr. Fisalis said, placing a slice of perfectly cut cake in front of me. *What a gentleman! Er, that's not what I meant to think.*

"Don't be silly, Mr. Fisalis. I can't just feed you my scraps! That was kind of you to offer, though!" I quickly resorted to my typical methods of brushing off his attempts at... whatever he was trying with laughter.

Seriously. I could see myself eating his leftovers, but I could never make him eat mine! He's from a noble family and the commander of an elite division of knights, for Pete's sake! Not to mention his subordinates are all watching! I couldn't bring myself to let him eat my scraps in front of them! It pains me to do so, but I must humbly decline your offer.

"You sure? Okay, suit yourself," he replied, grinning back at me. Hmm, that's unusual of him to give in so easily.

I pulled myself together and reached for the cake he had passed over to me. With its cute pink icing, it looked more like a work of art than food. Judging by the color, I guessed the flavor was some sort of berry, but when I took a bite, I

tasted rose jelly on the inside. A light, elegant taste filled my mouth along with pleasant sweetness.

Leave it to the most popular confectioner in the capital, I thought to myself as I trembled in saccharine ecstasy.

“Oh, that looks really good, what you’re having. Give me a piece,” Mr. Fisalis commented, suddenly popping into my view.

“AIEEE!” I involuntarily screeched when his handsome face appeared out of nowhere way, way, way too close to my own. *I was sure the lady knights were still en garde around me, but at some point or another he must’ve snuck in and taken the seat next to me.*

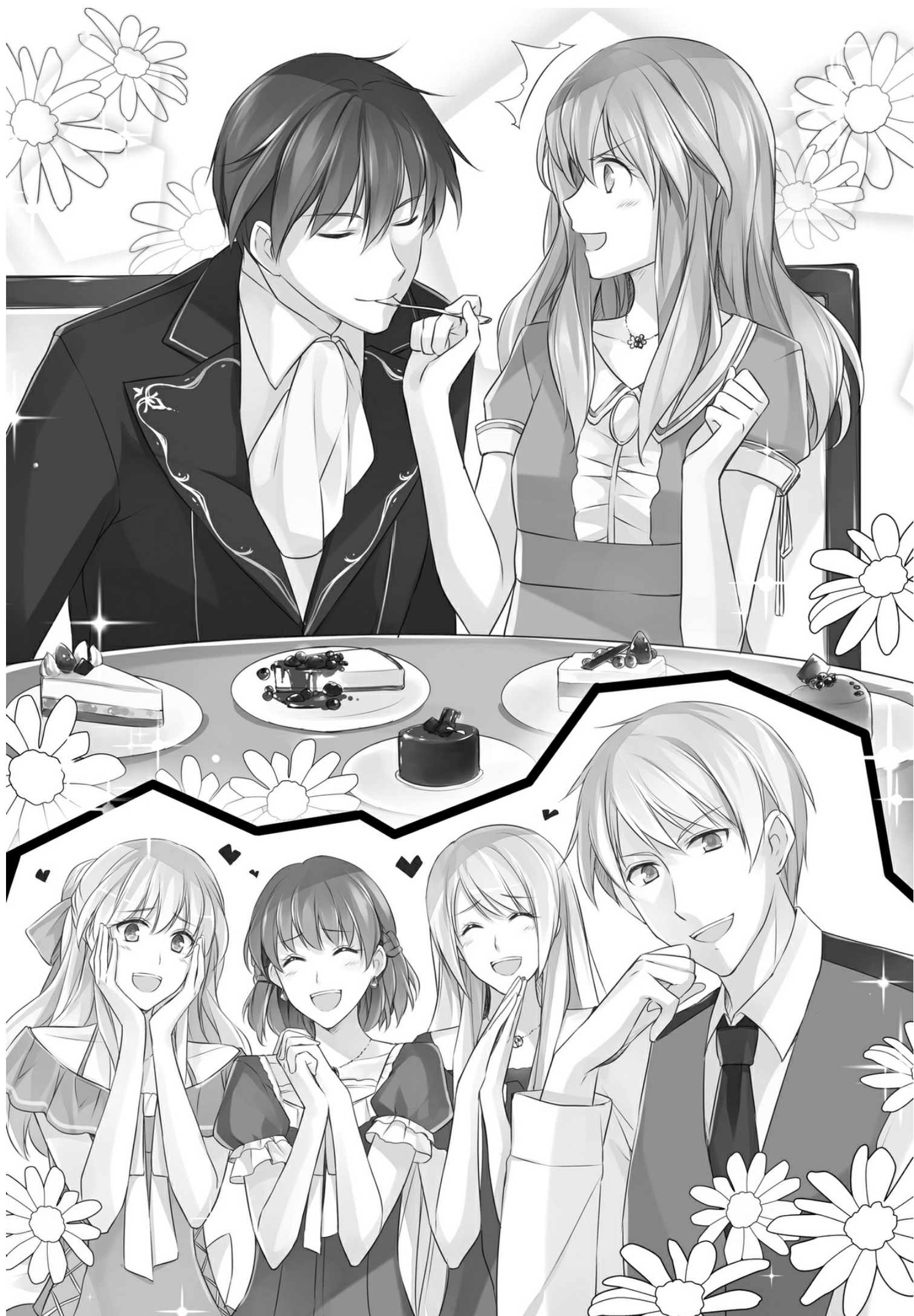
The ladies were grinning as they looked at us, and I saw that even his male subordinates sitting across from him were full of smiles, too. No, on second thought, those weren’t grins; they were smirks. *I’m glad you’re all so entertained, but I’m not some zoo animal! You can drop those pitying looks you’re giving me any time!*

“Vi?” Mr. Fisalis repeated, when I didn’t react.

“Oh, sorry. Here you go.” I was a little embarrassed to feel everyone’s eyes on me, but it wouldn’t have been right to ignore Mr. Fisalis, so I stabbed a piece of my cake with my fork and passed it over to him.

But...

Here I had presented the cake-laden fork to him expecting him to take the whole fork, but Mr. Fisalis went and ate it *directly off* the fork! Argh, I couldn’t take this man anywhere! Even the other knights and people in the cafe gasped! *Does your audacity know no bounds?* I wondered in wide-eyed astonishment. For his part, he looked back at me as he happily chewed his morsel, clearly pleased by the flavor.



“I was right, that *was* good. The rose oil really elevates it to something luxurious.”

“It really does!” I nodded, with a smile of my own. At least we could agree on that.

He really did seem to like the flavor, because then he asked, “Could I have another bite?”

“Sure!” I cut off another little wedge and offered my fork to him, and sure enough, he opened wide and ate that directly off the fork as well.

“Oh my, that’s good. One more.”

Okay, now you’re really pushing it.

Were you this annoying with Miss Calendula, I thought to myself, shooting him a glare, but he only seemed to be thinking about the cake. While I fed him forkful after forkful of my cake, it dawned on me that he actually was eating my leftovers now. And here I had only had a single bite!

Following my dumbstruck gaze to my empty plate, he said nonchalantly, “Did I eat it all? Oops,” before placing a different kind of cake in front of me, suggesting, “How about this one next?”

This kind of cake was the same shade of apple green as the outside of the store. Judging by the color, I surmised it might be pistachio flavored. The beauty of that perfectly presented slice of heaven melted my cold, bitter heart after Mr. Fisalis had eaten my last piece. I stashed away my fond memories of the rose cake in some corner of my mind and turned my focus to this new slice. *Goodbye, rose! Hello, pistachio!*

“Gosh, this one looks really good, too!”

“Try it.”

“I certainly will!” I picked up my fork at Mr. Fisalis’s gentle urging. *This time, I’m eating the whole thing!*

...Alas, although I was able to get one bite of it, the green cake, too, disappeared into Mr. Fisalis’ waiting mouth just like the rose cake had. I was starting to see a pattern emerge.

How many times did this happen, you wonder? Well, you know how I mentioned that the knights had gotten a slice of every kind of cake made in that shop? Yeah—I got a single bite of each. I was able to manage that many bites, since it wasn't an overwhelming amount of food. It was like I had detached from reality while I was eating, and I never really noticed that I hadn't gotten to eat most of what was supposed to be my cake, but when I finished, I felt it.

The stares.

The stares from all the knights. Upon Mr. Fisalis and me. And their grins. *They've been watching us the whole time.* And not in a normal way, either—in some carefully composed middle ground between indifference and optimism. The ladies' eyes glimmered like jewels, and their gazes stung like needles as they stared at us with satisfied smiles.

"I knew it all along—they *do* like each other."

"No doubt about it. This is textbook doting."

"Oh, now she's acting like she hates him. Oop, there she goes, look!" they whispered in precisely the right volume for Mr. Fisalis and me to understand them.

"Aaaaaaah!" they squealed. To top it all off, they could barely contain their enthusiasm.

I. can. Hear. You! Loud and clear! I was sort of put off by their child-like glee, so I just watched in silence.

Hm? Uhhh... eeeeeek!

I had no idea how I had gotten to that point, but I realized that I was feeding Mr. Fisalis *straight out of my hand!*

I let out a silent scream—reminiscent of *The Scream*, in fact. My heart was beating so fast when I realized this (or rather, was forced to realize it) that I thought it was going to burst. Mainly due to embarrassment, mind you! My cheeks felt like they were on fire.

How could I do this in front of other people?! Not that I'd be down for doing it in private, either—I am a fine, upstanding woman! (Wait, what now?!) And it

wasn't just his eating out of my hand that was embarrassing. If I had been giving Mr. Fisalis pieces of cake that I wasn't eating, then I essentially was feeding him my leftovers, right?! Just great! I did exactly what I said I wouldn't!

It seemed like only a matter of minutes to me, but some time later when our dessert party was winding down, Corydalis asked, "Hey, Commander, we reserved the bar for an after party, ya know. Care to go for a round?"

I glanced outside at the languid, late-afternoon sunlight. *The sun will be setting soon.* My stomach was feeling pretty good, but more importantly, it was getting dark. That would mean larger, rowdier crowds, so just when I was thinking that maybe we ought to call it a day: "Sorry, guys, I can't. Let's head home, Vi," Mr. Fisalis replied, gently turning them down. And so Mr. Fisalis and I left the knights with their warm (if not downright self-satisfied) smiles and the little green shop behind us, leisurely walking back to the manor.

"So, did you have a good time today? I wasn't expecting that surprise party at the end," Mr. Fisalis asked once the shop and the knights were out of sight. He smiled, but not before he let out a disappointed sigh.

"I did! And we still get to bring something home for everyone!" I said, referring to the parcel he was carrying. Far from mere leftovers, the neatly wrapped box was filled with one of each dessert from the shop. The servants were sure to like them. *Plus, I can enjoy them too once we get home!* Pretend I didn't think that.

There was no denying that I had been super embarrassed at the end, but what was one more thing to erase from my memory? I had a good time overall, though, so looking into his dark brown eyes, I gave him a smile of my own in return.

"I'm glad you did. Those guys really pulled one over on us, though."

I blushed just thinking about it. Something that felt like my soul was trying to escape my body.

"...As long as you weren't too bothered by it, it wasn't a bad thing, right?" I asked him.

“Well... I still had fun, yes. Ugh, I just wanted to give you a chance to satisfy your sweet tooth before I had to leave for my campaign. But then they went and launched a surprise attack on us when we couldn’t escape!”

Um, you sound a little resentful there, Mr. Fisalis! Oh well, at least this time our “date” actually qualified as one! Even though it would’ve been nice if we hadn’t been interrupted.

“I still had fun, though! I’m really glad I got to stroll around the city with you!”

“Was I that impressive?”

“Heh heh, it doesn’t take a lot to impress me. You bought me some lovely flowers, we had delicious sandwiches and cakes, and I got to see so many new sides of you, too: delighted, amazed, restrained... dark.” *Oh, is he blushing now?*
“Mr. Fisalis?”

“...Sorry. I was just... thinking. Ah, if nothing else, we tried our best!”

Now that was something worth celebrating!

“All that’s left now is for you to come home safe and sound.”

“You know I will!”

No, his determination was what made it worth it.

6 — Two Families Under One Roof

A few days after our date:

Mr. Fisalis had left for the campaign in a great mood. Our outing must have recharged his batteries, because his motivation and drive were back at one hundred percent. I even made him something like two dozen embroidered handkerchiefs after he begged me for something ‘to boost his morale.’ I got a kink in my neck for my troubles, but that was no big deal if it would make it easier for him to do his job properly. And afterwards, of course, Mimosa massaged the stiffness right out of me.

It was decided that my in-laws would come to stay at the manor in Mr. Fisalis’s stead while he was away. Why, you ask? The reason given to me was that they ‘wanted to get away for a while.’

The Fisalis family’s primary territory was located near the capital, but they also had additional territories scattered about in other regions. The area containing the much-discussed hot spot along the southern border actually belonged to them. And that was how my father-in-law had ended up being appointed an unofficial margrave—someone in charge of looking after the border for the kingdom. I only learned it then because Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas had told me not to worry myself over politics or the Fisalis family rule. I had never been very good at politics anyway and hadn’t put in much effort to study it, much to my embarrassment.

My in-laws’ earlier surprise attack—I mean, visit—had been the result of an emergency summons regarding the current situation in the southern kingdom. Turns out it wasn’t just some trivial business in the capital after all.

This time around, I’d received prior notice from Mr. Fisalis of my in-laws’ intention to visit, so I had plenty of time to get ready. I wasn’t sure how long they planned to stay, but I hoped they would choose to stay in the cottage rather than the main house, so Dahlia, Mimosa, and a few other maids helped me prepare the cottage for their arrival. We hurried back and forth between the cottage and the main house changing the sheets, stocking the cutlery, and doing some laundry.

“I hope they’ll like it here in the cottage,” I wondered out loud to Dahlia, aware that the main house was probably more convenient.

“I get the impression that they enjoy their privacy...” she replied with something of a tired sigh.

Oh. I see. I couldn’t stop the faint smile that spread across my face at the thought of the two of them being all lovey-dovey in the cottage.

Lord and Lady Fisalis arrived loaded with gifts, just like they had last time, but other than that, they did not seem to have much luggage with them.

“Thank you for letting us stay here until things back there quiet down,” Lady Fisalis thanked me.

“Yes, thank you very much, Vi!” Lord Fisalis agreed.

My dapper father-in-law and my beautiful mother-in-law, who both very much resembled Mr. Fisalis, were all smiles. The both of them possessed a certain ageless charm. And then there was me, with my earnest but paltry twenty-dollar smile which was totally overshadowed by their beauty.

“It’s my pleasure! Please make yourselves at home here until the danger passes,” I said stiffly. My mother-in-law seemed to sense my stress because she followed up with:

“Don’t mind us, dear. You can go about everything as usual.” She punctuated this with a dazzling smile.

“...Yeahhh, that’s not going to be possible...” I muttered to myself.

“...That’s for sure...” Mimosa echoed, equally quiet.

“Ah, is something the matter?” Mother Fisalis asked us, with a cute tilt of her head, unable to make out what we were saying.

“Hm? Oh, nothing! Hee hee,” I fibbed.

“Thank you again for having us, Vi! I’d like to take you out and to go shopping, just the two of us, as thanks!”

Oh no. That sounds like another VIP shopping spree.

“Looks like I’ll have to hang you up for a little while until they go home,” I told my maids’ uniform through my tears. I was back in my room after showing my in-laws to the cottage.

“Really now, Madam. There’s no need for tears,” Dahlia said with a grim smile in the face of my theatrics.

“What do you think of this dress for tomorrow, Madam? I suspect it isn’t one of the three you regularly wear, so I was thinking we could mix and match to make seven outfits instead. We prepared a great many outfits for you, but I’m sure we can figure out a way for you to wear all of them,” Mimosa said cheerfully as she added a dress to my normal rotation and planned out the next day’s outfit in my dressing room. I pretended I didn’t hear the last part.

“Sure, that’s fine. I still don’t see why I can’t spend my days like I normally do, given they’re staying in the cottage...”

“It’s true that they’re not staying in the manor, but they will be eating their meals in the main dining room,” replied Dahlia, acknowledging what I’d said with an anxious crease in her brow.

Argh! Figures. I can’t eat in the servants’ dining room, either. Can’t be sure when they’ll just waltz into the main house.

“...I hate being alone.” It was easy to imagine what was in store: eating all by myself in the obnoxiously massive main dining room. Just imagining it made me want to cry. Confronted with that option, I honestly preferred eating with Mr. Fisalis. Dinnertime conversation with him had been awkward at first, but as of late we’d both gotten used to eating together and that uncomfortable feeling had vanished. In fact, since Mr. Fisalis had so many interesting things to talk about, I came to rather enjoy dinner with him.

“It’s just a temporary inconvenience, Madam. I know you can get through it!” Mimosa assured me with a clenched fist and a determined look in her eyes. Her voice shook me out of my flight of fancy about dinner with Mr. Fisalis.

“We will be back to normal in no time,” Dahlia consoled me with a slightly stiff smile.

“Yeah, you’re right. It is what it is. There’s no point in complaining about it all

day,” I replied, encouragingly, finally resigning myself to my fate. *That’s right, Mother Fisalis did tell me I should just go about my day as usual! I’ll take her at her word!*

The next day:

In the morning, I put on a neat and tidy dress and had Mimosa do my makeup *au naturel*, just like she did when Mr. Fisalis was there, before I headed down to breakfast. There was no deviation from how my mornings had usually gone since I’d started eating breakfast with Mr. Fisalis.

But that day was not like the others before it.

When I entered the main dining room with Dahlia and Mimosa, Rohtas was the only one there. Mr. Fisalis was not. Just Rohtas and the absurdly large dining table. I couldn’t help but feel a little sense of loss at the sight. *There’s no ignoring how radiant Mr. Fisalis usually was in the morning.*

“Good morning, Madam.”

“Good morning, Rohtas. I guess this is where it starts, huh?” I asked, crestfallen, as I took my seat in the chair he pulled out for me.

“I am afraid so. Please do your best to bear it. Perhaps you might appreciate a diversion—I can have the kitchen prepare you a servant’s breakfast.”

“Oh, yes, I would like that. I mean, I’d much rather prefer to eat in the servants’ dining room!” I lamented melodramatically, fork and knife in hand.

A short time later, the gentle clinking of silverware against china and glass on wood echoed through the open dining room.

Isn’t this familiar? It feels just like my first day here after I got married. Back then, I used some admittedly out-of-character methods to ‘un-alone’ myself. I wonder if they’d still work? Figuring I’d never know unless I tried, I put my head down; once I’d forced an ample amount of tears into my eyes, I looked toward Rohtas and...

“Madam. Please do not try that a second time.” Rohtas was staring straight at me.

“Curses! You caught me this time, but next time...” Honestly, I should have

expected as much from him. *We didn't kid around with each other like this six months ago. To think he can totally see through me now! I guess I can't pull one over on him anymore. I was only able to get my way back then because nobody knew me yet, and they stayed emotionally distant.*

Curtly brushing aside my cunning strategy, Rohtas said, "You'll have to try harder than that, Madam. Now then, make haste with your breakfast. Oh, yes," he remembered something, prompting one of his usual kind smiles. "Bellis told me about the seedlings Mr. Fisalis had sent here during your excursion the other day," he said, dangling a metaphorical carrot in front of me.

He means there's some gardening waiting for me if I can get through this challenge of eating alone!

"Oh, boy! I nearly forgot about those! I had better hurry up and eat, then, so I can go see The Demon King, er, Bellis! Dahlia, Mimosa!" Mood improved considerably, I scarfed down my breakfast. I guess I fell for the ol' carrot and stick routine.

When I'd finished eating my once-miserable-now-pleasant breakfast, I headed over to the greenhouse. Bellis was already there waiting for me so we could transplant the seedlings together.

"I bought these thinking I'd cut them up and make them into a bouquet, but now that I look at them, I think I'd rather plant them and enjoy them that way," I told him as I picked up one of the pots. The seedling in this one had smallish, light pink flowers.

"I see. These bloom multiple times over the course of a year, so you'll be able to admire them all year round," he explained, picking up the other seedling.

"Ex-actly! Good thing we bought the seedlings and not the bouquet, then!"

"Yes."

I didn't think Mr. Fisalis had been aware of it, but he'd made an excellent choice!

"I wonder if they'll bloom again when Mr. Fisalis comes home?" It didn't seem likely that the current blooms would last for more than a month. I really wanted him to see them, since he had bought them for me.

“Once the current flowers wither away, the new ones will blossom.”

“They sure are blooming beautifully now! Let’s put our whole hearts into helping them stay beautiful so Master can see the flowers too,” Mimosa replied to me after Bellis.

Whether he got to see them or not, I was still very grateful to Mr. Fisalis for buying the flowers for me.

“Where should we plant them? The whole garden had already been planned out down to the last inch, so I don’t know if we can find anywhere to put these. It’s a packed house in the flowerbeds, and if we just plant them randomly around the garden, we’ll surely face Bellis’s icy wrath.”

I looked this way and that, potted seedling in hand, but I couldn’t find an acceptable spot. Bellis would rain fire and brimstone down on us if we even temporarily planted them in some corner of the garden. I shuddered at the thought of a vengeful Demon King.

“If I may, it wouldn’t do these flowers justice to simply shove them into a corner,” Mimosa pointed out as she racked her brains along with me. We both groaned, at a loss as to what we should do.

“Madam, why not plant them in your flowerbed?” Bellis suggested calmly.

He’s right! I completely forgot about that. The one place in this entire garden that’s allowed to be random! Yeah, why not go with my personal flowerbed?

“That’s a great idea! There’s still plenty of space there, and it would accentuate its natural simplicity.”

I could plant whatever I wanted in my personal flowerbed, so I had filled it with the nameless wildflowers I so loved. It looked just like the garden at my parents’ house. Mine was even more casual, though—in my opinion, anyway. Simplicity wins again! Once I had made up my mind, all the other pieces fell into place.

Mimosa and I followed Bellis as he carried the tray containing the seedlings to my flowerbed in a corner of the garden. While it was a corner, it wasn’t at all dark or soggy. The spot was surrounded by waist-high shrubs, and with no trees to block it off, it got excellent sunlight and very good air flow. The stream that

fed into the pond by the cottage ran nearby, so watering was a breeze, too. Don't ever look down on corners!

"Hmm, how about here?" I wondered aloud as I tried different positions for the seedlings.

I had three kinds of flowers to work with and five of each, making fifteen total plants. There was one kind with light pink blossoms, one with red, and one that had an abundance of tiny white blossoms. Arranging them as if he was making a bouquet, Bellis said, "These colors all harmonize well... This will look nice, I think." *Bellis gave me a compliment! Woohoo!* To the untrained eye, nothing about his expression said 'good job,' but I could see how his eyes crinkled ever so slightly. *This is evidence that he's in a pleasant mood! It's a very subtle change, no doubt, so it's easy to overlook.*

"Woow, thank you, Bellis! It's not every day the Demon King hands out compliments!"

"...Addressing me by my real name is also an effective way of showing gratitude."

It was very rare... no, it was the first time Bellis had ever complimented me, and I was so overwhelmed by the unidentifiable emotion that poured over me like water that I could only stare at him in awe. Mimosa snickered as if to say, "Madam, chill out," as she watched my back and forth with Bellis from where she stood beside me holding my parasol.

"Let's get them planted, then!" I said, picking up a shovel and starting to dig with gusto into the soft soil.

"Ewww, worms!"

"Madam, please don't fling the shovel to and fro. You narrowly avoided maiming Mimosa just now. Careful."

"Madam, you have dirt on your face!"

"Huh? Where?"

"Ugh, everywhere! All the dirt from in that hole is all over you! I'll do it! Stand over there and don't get in my way!"

We were going on like that, the three of us, laughing, groaning, and generally acting like children playing in the dirt, when suddenly:

“Viola?”

“Vi?”

“Gah?!”

My in-laws appeared from the other side of a thicket. I was so startled that I jumped and then fell on my rear. And here I thought I might escape my regular embarrassment with Mr. Fisalis away.

“Father Fisalis, Mother Fisalis, you look well...?”

“Why did you phrase that like a question? Better yet, Viola, what in heaven’s name are you doing in a place like this?” Lord Fisalis asked. Clearly he meant in the dirt in a corner of the garden. *Oh, yeahhh. We’re right by the cottage.*

Whelp. Looks like my in-laws caught me red-handed... or maybe, green-thumbed?



7 — A Narrow Escape There are currently two families living at the Fisalis estate. My husband, however, is still away on a military campaign. The cottage is currently occupied by my mother- and father-in-law.

...And yet.

Here they are outside catching me off guard while I'm gardening!

"Viola?" My in-laws abruptly appeared, seemingly out of nowhere.

It was not the best reaction for someone doing something perfectly normal, but I completely froze. I was no longer holding the shovel that I had been a moment earlier but my hands and the hem of my skirt instead; my rear end (upon which I had so ungracefully fallen) and my face all had dirt on them. I was past the point where I could easily brush it off as 'admiring the flowers on this fine day, oh ho ho ho ☆'

Oh nooo, I have no idea what excuse to give them! This is the end of the line for me!

"It-It's good to see you, Father and Mother Fisalis! What fine weather we're having today! Are you two headed out somewhere?" I clapped my filthy hands behind my back to shake off the dirt while simultaneously trying to discreetly straighten out my skirt as I stood up. I smiled like nothing strange was happening.

"Eh heh, well. We were just about to go into town when we heard laughter coming from this way, so we decided to see what was going on," my father-in-law said simply. His tone of voice was normal and when I glanced up at his face, he didn't appear angry or disgusted by what, to him, looked like the servants digging in the garden. I felt somewhat relieved when the smile that appeared on his face suggested that nothing was out of the ordinary and that he had simply found the source of the noise.

“Oh! That makes perfect sense!” I finally replied.

“So then, what are you doing there, Vi?” Lady Fisalis asked with a curious glint in her eye as she looked over the scene around me. It was clear as day that I was gardening, so it would have been pointless to insist otherwise. I stepped away from the flower bed, leaving Mimosa and Bellis behind for a moment, and pointed out the flowers we’d just planted to my in-laws.

“The seedlings that Mr. Fisalis and I bought the other day arrived, so Mimosa and I came here with Bellis to have him help me plant them,” I explained honestly. I expected her to be angry with me: a proper duchess would never get her hands dirty. But I didn’t want her to get angry at Mimosa and Bellis over something that was my fault.

They only looked to where I was pointing with interest, their cheery demeanors never faltering.

“What lovely flowers. He bought these, you say?” my father-in-law questioned, gazing with wonder at the seedlings. The version of Mr. Fisalis that his father knew was probably the kind of man who gave flashy bouquets made with eye-catching, ostentatious flowers to whoever he was seducing that we —*COUGH COUGH*—I mean, gave elegant bouquets as gifts. *Lord Fisalis is probably wondering if Mr. Fisalis bought these humdrum little flowers as a joke or something! Granted, I was surprised when he said he’d buy them, too.*

“He sure did. I spotted them in a little flower shop and thought they were cute, so he bought them for me. He said that since cut flowers die quickly, we’d probably enjoy these more since they bloom over and over again.” I smiled as I thought back to our date. I never thought I’d hear Mr. Fisalis say that he would buy such ordinary little flowers, much less that he cared about getting his money’s worth out of them! It really was an unexpected series of events that day, but it made me oh so happy!

“Who would have thought...”

“That our boy would...”

“Yep.” Both Lord and Lady Fisalis seemed shocked to hear what their son had said.

“He did, indeed! Heh heh, aren’t they just the most lovely flowers? The weather is just perfect today and gardening is so much fun. I’m out here a lot, actually. Aren’t I, Bellis?”

Mother Fisalis grinned when her eyes met mine, and then she turned her gaze back to the flower bed, looking at it with something like nostalgia before smiling at Bellis too.

“Yes, Madam. And by ‘here’ you surely mean over there, away from the dirt and filth.”

“Oh, of cooourse!” I agreed, smiling as convincingly as I could. I hadn’t expected Lady Fisalis to say what she had, but I also hadn’t expected Bellis to give me *that* answer, either.

I had always thought that a textbook duchess like Lady Fisalis would have turned her nose up at gardening, but I guess that was presumptuous of me. Now that I think about it, I don’t know her very well, do I...?

“...Did you like to plant flowers when you lived here, Mother Fisalis?”

“I did. So much so that Dahlia regularly scolded me, saying I would get sunburned! I’m sure Mimosa treats you just the same. Oh, goodness, Vi, you have a speck of dirt on your face.”

Oops. I was just about to ask Mimosa to get that. How embarrassing that I forgot about dirt on my face.

I hurriedly went to wipe my face, but my handkerchief was with Mimosa. Which meant that I only succeeded in smearing the dirt further around my face. *Oh, cripes.* Lady Fisalis elegantly wiped the dirt from my face with her own handkerchief, but not before giggling at me as I flailed. It was a relief, despite my horror that she felt she needed to do that for me.

“I never thought you’d be one for gardening,” I said.

Lady Fisalis, as I knew her, was always bright and cheery, so I never figured she was self-absorbed, or aloof, but I’m still surprised. Not to mention that her relationship with Dahlia seems to have been a mirror image of mine with Mimosa.

It made for a charming image—Dahlia nagging her like that, and Lady Fisalis absolutely not caring.

“Oh, was she ever! And Dahlia was *not* happy about it. People are not so strict now, though, and you’re more free to do what you like. They really are lovely, those flowers. I’m sure Cercis will be delighted to hear that you planted these,” Father Fisalis said fondly.

“I hope so, too. My fingers are crossed that I can keep them looking this beautiful for when he gets back,” I replied, looking at the pretty blossoms at our feet.

“I’m certain you will! You’ll take wonderful care of them, Vi!” My mother-in-law took my hand and gave it a little squeeze.

“I’ll sure try!”

“My apologies for interrupting you, dear. Let’s get going, Angulata,” Lord Fisalis said as he gave Lady Fisalis’s hand a tug.

“Yes, yes, dear. Have a lovely day, Vi. See you later!”

“Yes, see you later!”

And so the two of them left, holding hands and smiling back at us.

“Oh, oh boy. That was a close one! I was sure they’d be mad at me for doing something as unrefined as this!” I said with a huge sigh, squatting there in the flower bed after my knees gave way.

“Are you alright, Madam?!” Mimosa rushed over to me.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just wasn’t careful enough—I knew they’d be staying in the cottage and yet I let them catch me gardening on their first day here!”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself...” Mimosa said with a bit of a smile.

Bellis pulled me up without a word, but then said, with his usual expression (or lack thereof), “Lady Fisalis did quite a bit of gardening when she lived here, so Rohtas and I have never tried to stop you. We knew she would not find fault with you.” Of course, he only decided to tell me *then*. Long after I would have liked to know!

“What? You knew but didn’t tell me?” I sure would have liked to know that a lot sooner, you two! It would have saved me a whole lot of worry! Give me back the years I’m sure got shaved off my lifespan while I was so scared of getting caught!

“Oh well, I’m glad we’ve settled that, though. Anyway, let’s get this place cleaned up.” I turned to Bellis only to find that he had already gotten back to work while I was talking. I didn’t have the guts to scold him, so I just said, “Okay, then,” and joined him in quietly cleaning up around the flower bed.

Later, I ate too much during lunch because I was so focused on not crying over being made to eat alone. As a result, I didn’t get much done in the afternoon.

“I’m just usually so busy with cleaning and laundry and stuff. But since I can’t do either of those things, what am I supposed to do now?” I asked myself out loud. A dance lesson? With slave-driver Rohtas? I don’t think so! Do some embroidery? Nope, just made a whole mountain of handkerchiefs before Mr. Fisalis left! I could read... But it’s so nice out today, I’d just make myself even more depressed if I stayed inside. I stood with my arms crossed, at odds with myself for the first time in quite a while over how I was going to spend my day. *This happened right after I got married, too.*

Perhaps they simply intended to go along with whatever I wanted, but neither Dahlia nor Mimosa had yet made any suggestions. *Yawn.*

“I could always do more gardening now that Mother Fisalis has given her approval. But... I know all that’s left is weeding, and there isn’t even that much of it to do, so I’d just be pulling up the lawn by the end of the afternoon. Kind of scary how I know it’ll end up that way. Granted, if I did do that, it’d be hellfire time.”

I don’t have any real experience being either a wealthy young woman or a wealthy wife (huh?), so I’m out of ideas about what’s appropriate for me to do.

I could always... cannonball onto my bed. It’s been a while since I’ve done that, too!

“Oh, that gives me an idea!” No sooner had I landed on my bed with a cushy *fwump* than a certain word flashed through my mind.

“Are you alright, Madam?” I had stopped moving as soon as I landed on my bed, so Dahlia had come over, concerned that I’d broken something.

“Say, Dahlia— Since Lord and Lady Fisalis haven’t found me out, that means I can just do everything as normal, right? Might you even say, it’s in my best interest to do just that?” I asked her.

“Well, I suppose that is true, but... you almost *were* discovered earlier today, were you not?” Dahlia slyly replied, pretending to agree with me at first before delivering a painful reminder.

“Oof... Way to rub salt in my wound...” I clutched my chest dramatically and hid under my duvet. Indeed, Dahlia was blessed with the rare skill of being able to motivate me in precisely the right ways! This was no place for me to give up! I had to try harder! “Yeah, I guess I was. So next time I’ll have to be extra sneaky! Right?”

“...What are you thinking of doing?”

“Umm, just everyday stuff.”

“‘Everyday stuff,’ such as?”

“The usual, of course! Decorating and cleaning! I’ll restrain myself from doing the laundry,” I explained with what I hoped was an innocent smile. Dahlia just put her hand to her temple and adopted a pained expression.

“What’s wrong, Dahlia?! Do you have a headache?!”

“No, Madam... I don’t... Er, rather, I suppose I do.”

“Which is it?! Er, well, anyway, if I do it in secret, it won’t be too big of a deal if I get caught, yeah?”

“And what will you do that ‘won’t be a big deal’?”

“Oh, just putting some fresh flowers around the manor, and maybe some dusting.”

“I think the former ought to be fine, but the latter, no.”

“Huh, really?! O-Okay.”

“So even if I object, you’d still do it?” Dahlia said, with a deep sigh woven into

her words.

“I promise I won’t cause you any trouble!” I tried, giving her my cutest begging pose. *Ah, this was how things went when I first got here. That reminds me, didn’t Rohtas say that “there will be no second time?”*

“That shan’t work on me a second time, Madam,” Dahlia shot me down with a smile.

“Oh no, not you, too!” *She saw through my puppy dog eyes!*

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 1, Cercis' Perspective

— The Undercover Operation ◆ ◆ ◆

My special division has been constructing a frontline base as part of an advance party near the border separating the Flür Kingdom and its southern neighbor, Aurantia, on land belonging to the Fisalis family.

We had been investigating in secret ever since we received a tip from someone in Aurantia that the kingdom is conspiring to go to war with Flür. Our cover was almost completely blown when, in the middle of the investigation, some tradesman told Viola I was having an affair! I suspect he received quite the tongue lashing from Rohtas, but (typical of me, I suppose) I was not satisfied.

Damn it all.

...Ahem.

At any rate, we gathered all the intel we could from our secret base outside the capital and have begun to approach enemy territory. We will work out a more specific strategy once we scope out the situation here.

Thus:

“I’ve decided we’ll disguise ourselves as merchants on business for our time undercover. We can’t afford to stand out.”

From here on, our undercover work will be deep in enemy territory. It’s unlikely that we will be recognized, since Aurantia is a third-world country, but just in case, we’ll don disguises (as well-worn as they are by now) and appropriate makeup.

But.

“You’ll probably stick out the most, Commander.”

“No one would forget a merchant that good-looking.”

“You need an uglier disguise!”

My subordinates like to make mountains out of molehills. As soon as they lay

eyes on me, it's nothing but complaints. They say whatever they want, with no filter whatsoever, about my disguises—"it just doesn't look right," "okay, but now try to look even worse," and "don't let your innate elegance show!"

If they have the time to complain, then I think they ought to have plenty of time for more training too, but as far as disguises go, they are right that it's important to be inconspicuous. Standing out in this scenario would be objectively bad.

I was contemplating how the hell I was supposed to make myself uglier when one of them said, "Ah, in that case... try this!" I was handed a pair of glasses with absurdly thick black frames.

Seriously?

These are so thick they'd only make my vision worse.

"Only some nerdy librarian from the Royal Library would wear these," I said.

"Which makes them a perfect disguise!"

Wondering to myself if I could use them as a prop, I gave in to the pressure and put them on... only to notice that my subordinates all looked disappointed. *What now? I put them on like you told me to. Do they look weird?*

"Oh no, the glasses only make him look even more stunning..."

"Damn it! How is this possible?!" My subordinates were making quite the scene, slamming their fists on the table and crying. I ignored their antics. I couldn't understand why they were so upset.

I guess the glasses look better on me than they expected? Don't make this awkward, everyone.

"Look, guys, don't be so depressed. It does make him look *slightly* less immaculate," said Corydalis, my lieutenant commander, as he tried to calm them down. He was disguised as a merchant, too, but the look somehow actually suited him.

Hell. This isn't the first time I've noticed that he's really good with disguises. That pisses me off, though, so I'm not going to let on about that.

"Lieutenant Commander! Do you mean to say that even wearing hideous

accessories only makes him slightly less attractive? You're going to make us cry!"

"He's making us normies look even uglier!"

"Hey, g-guys. Chill. It's not like we have much of a choice. It's 'slightly nerdy' or nothing." Corydalis continued to try to placate my subordinates as the latter clung to one another and whined.

I still don't get what all the fuss is about.

—At a Pub, Undercover—

Undercover in Aurantia, we made contact with our target on multiple occasions and managed to gather some useful intel. We took the opportunity to scout the area while we were there. Using textiles that would have been hard to find in Aurantia only made our merchant disguises more convincing. We'd actually sourced those textiles from Viola's family territory! Since they weren't commonly found in other kingdoms, it would have been nearly impossible to trace them back to that specific place. Additionally, we'd contributed to the Euphorbia family's income, thereby making it a two-birds-one-stone deal!

Enough about that, though.

"A lot of them are dressed better than I expected," I grumbled after I had finished talking with our informant and discreetly surveyed the area.

"According to our research, this place gets some rather fancy clientele. A lot of travelers, too, which means this is an ideal site for undercover work," Corydalis explained. Judging from their skin tone and clothes, it did indeed seem as though many people in the crowd weren't from Aurantia.

He's not kidding—this spot really is perfect.

The other knights sat next to us, also in disguise; they were eating and drinking just like everyone else in the pub as Corydalis and I exchanged occasional comments. *Did they forget what they were here for?* In the pub with Corydalis and I were two of our male subordinates, Lantana and Jen, as well as Chamomile and Angelica, both disguised as men; the two of them did everything together.

Foreign merchants stayed in here talking business for longer than they'd stand around on the street, so many of them were doing so over dinner. When we weren't talking in private with our informant, we had been visiting other establishments so as not to rouse suspicion.

"Boy, men's clothes really suit them," Lantana said in awe as he looked at Chamomile and Angelica. It was a perfect disguise—no one would assume they were anything other than unusually beautiful, feminine men.

"Didja expect anything less? It takes balls to pull something like this off, and we've got the biggest ones here!" laughed Chamomile heartily as she chugged malt liquor. *She's almost too much of a natural at that...*

"But you never know what someone may try when they see a lithe young man."

"Huh? Who do ya think you're talkin' to? There wouldn't be nothin' left of anyone who tried messin' with me!" Chamomile replied to her fellow knight with a roguish grin. *...Okay, yeah, she's definitely way too good at being a man.*

"What's scary is that she seems like she really could."

"She definitely could," Lantana and Jen whispered back and forth, timidly. They quickly found themselves on the receiving end of Chamomile's glare, though, and cringed in fright.

Suddenly, raucous laughter cut straight through all the tension in the air (granted, the tension was limited to the air between my male subordinates).

"Man, who would've thought we'd make such great men? We'd have hell to pay if our disguises failed!" Angelica added in a baritone voice, jovially swigging a tankard full of more malt liquor. *...How is she even making that voice?*

My poor (male) subordinates could only look on in amazement.

"For real, no one would ever guess they're women."

"If anything, they look manlier than a lot of the actual guys here," Lantana and Jen whispered in each other's ears in order to be heard over Chamomile and Angelica's loud laughter.

We'd be a real force to be reckoned with if Alkanna had joined us. No, never

mind, I can barely keep these two in line as it is. They'd be uncontrollable once she was added to the mix. No, I need to put a stop to this, now!

“What did you just say?!” Chamomile and Angelica asked my men threateningly.

They... they really do look like guys. Viola would probably go nuts if she could see them now. And she's friendly with them, too! She'd probably be really into them if she saw them dressed like this. I-I'm not jealous or anything, though!

And thus I found myself sitting in that crowded pub attempting to re-convince myself of my own masculinity, surrounded by the good company of my men—both the ones who were born that way and... the other two. They seemed to have fun joking around with each other, so Corydalis and I left them alone and busied ourselves watching the other customers.

8 — Correspondence

Almost a week had gone by since Mr. Fisalis had left for his campaign. His absence had come up relatively frequently in conversation, but it was most noticeable when I ate my meals alone every day. I couldn't help but remember how he always had something interesting to talk about. As a result, Mr. Fisalis' very existence was reduced to mere memory, much as it was when I had first moved to the manor so long ago.

Yet, it felt as if he was still there. He had changed so much from the man I'd first met!

"An envoy from the Royal Palace is expected to come today," Rohtas mentioned as he told me the day's schedule over my after-breakfast tea. *Hm? Why would a messenger from the palace be coming here?*

"What business does someone from the palace have here? Is it with my father-in-law?"

"No, it will be with you, Madam. Er, I suppose it is also of interest to the former duke and duchess, as well. The messenger is to bring a letter from the front lines."

"The front lines?"

"Reports and directives are passed between the palace and the front lines on a nearly daily basis. Letters home are occasionally among them."

Oh ho. So this messenger is just like a mailman!

"I understand now."

"One with a social standing as high as Master's can receive envoys from the palace. Otherwise, it will be a postman from the military."

Wow! I mean, what a striking example of class difference, but, wow! Mr. Fisalis gets letters from the palace! Everywhere I go, anything I do, I'm reminded of how he's basically a huge celebrity.

"So which will be coming today?"

“I am not certain of that myself... But, at any rate, we will have a visitor, so please be present to receive him.”

“I will!”

We don't know when our guest is coming, so I'll have to be patient! Roger that, Rohtas!

Said envoy arrived just as Rohtas was explaining everything to me, so Rohtas left to meet him. When I went to see who it was, I stiffened and clenched my jaw.

“Good day, Madam! I've come with a letter from the Commander!”

The person Rohtas led inside was not only one of Mr. Fisalis' subordinates, but one-third of the Bombshell Trio: the blonde-haired lady knight. The sight of her backlit by the sun outside took my breath away. Her beautiful golden hair was neatly tied back in a high ponytail and she was impeccably dressed in a dashing knight's uniform. In a word, she was awe-inspiring. Her appearance conveyed such strength that I bet doors just flew open on their own wherever she went!

“Ahem.” Rohtas cleared his throat, jerking me back to reality after I'd been enchanted by the lady knight's overwhelming beauty. *Oops, I was drooling.*

Oh, if the envoy is one of the knights, does that mean the message is a letter from Mr. Fisalis?

She smiled gently at me and handed me the letter from Mr. Fisalis. This was no time for me to let myself be enchanted by her smile that was currently ever-so-close to my own face. She was only delivering a message on behalf of Mr. Fisalis, after all.

“Thank you so, so much for coming all the way here. Did you have a report to deliver to the Royal Palace?” *Based on what Rohtas told me, that would probably be her main job, but she doesn't appear to be carrying anything other than the letter from Mr. Fisalis.*

“Yep! Got it taken care of real fast!” she replied with a lovely grin. *Reporting to the palace was the main reason she came to the capital, so acting like it wasn't that big a deal is...*

“Are you sure you didn’t need to take your time?”

“Well, the war hasn’t started yet and the situation down there hasn’t changed much. Besides, presenting the report at a formal meeting with His Majesty and a bunch of old rich guys is a real pain; it just drags on and on. Someone more disciplined than me would be better suited to attend meetings. So when the opportunity came up to be an envoy, I snatched it up!”

Did she just ‘tee hee’ when she said that? I get the feeling she’s being a little too forthright. She kind of does come off as someone who speaks without thinking.

“Ohh, oh, I see. Do you happen to have time for a cup of tea as thanks for bringing me the letter?” *I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear her say all that stuff about the report. She came all this way from the campaign site to deliver Mr. Fisalis’ correspondence to me, after all, so I ought to treat her properly and offer her some tea and sweets.*

The lady knight was technically on duty, so the possibility that she might turn me down crossed my mind, but:

“Of course! That’s why I was in such a rush to get here from the palace! I wanted to spend some time and chat with you! This messenger business usually means you’re riding a horse all night, so it’s certainly not the easiest job in the world, and then everyone just hands their problems off to someone else. It’s like they just accepted anyone who signed up for this campaign!” came her immediate reply.

Why did she feel the need to tell me all that? Did Mr. Fisalis’ subordinates get in an argument over who would be the messenger? They’d argue with their fists in a situation like that, I bet. Either way, I bet they’d cause a big uproar over it. Not to mention I can practically see Mr. Fisalis and Corydalis’ shocked faces.

So things are peaceful down there now... Wait, no, aren’t they supposed to be assigned to the dangerous front lines right now? I feel kinda like my head is spinning.

“Dahlia, have some tea brought to the salon.” I pulled myself out of my own head, having determined that I would ignore that comment, too, and asked Dahlia to prepare some tea.

“As you wish.”

“Is everything going well down there? How are you all faring?”

“Er, well, the Commander is doing very well. He’s been working incredibly hard because he wants to come home as soon as possible.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear! How do things look in terms of the war?”

“We’re tracking their movements at present, so it’s a wait-and-see situation. The commander has instructed us to consider several different strategies.”

“O-Oh! Alright, now I understand! So it’s not at the point of outright war yet?”

“Correct.”

The lady knight and I made conversation in the salon over some of Cartham’s signature sweets and the delicious tea Mimosa brewed. The focus was Mr. Fisalis’ status update, but... she couldn’t go into too much detail about the work they were doing, and I didn’t understand a lot of what she told me anyway, so the conversation didn’t really go anywhere. Still, though... it was a relief to know that we weren’t at open war yet.

“Oh, that reminds me. The commander ordered me to bring back a reply,” she said offhandedly after she placed her cup on her saucer.

“Hm?” She had said so much that I thought I might have misheard her. *So, I’m to write a letter even though I’ve only just received this one now? I haven’t even opened the envelope yet.*

“You can write it here after you read his letter, or you can just write about how you are doing before reading his. Either one is fine, so long as I have something to take back,” the lady knight pressed when I froze.

“Right here?”

“Yup, right here!” she said with a half-hearted smile that rather failed to encourage me.

Should I really open his letter right here? I wondered. But when I looked into the lady knight’s eyes, I could practically hear her thinking ‘Yes! Right now! Read it right now!’

“Oh, the letter has already been approved by the inspector over there, so you’re free to read it!”

“Huh?”

“All letters exchanged have to be inspected.”

...I guess that makes sense. You wouldn’t want important information to be leaked. It’s pretty common knowledge that mail associated with the Royal Palace or the government (including the military) is subject to strict regulation. So even though he’s the commander of a special division, Mr. Fisalis’ letters have to be inspected, too, to make sure they don’t contain any classified information.

Despite the inspection of mail being pretty common knowledge, I hadn’t personally known anyone who was subject to it until just now, so it had completely slipped my mind. Never in my wildest dreams had I ever thought I’d get a piece of mail that had been officially inspected.

...Well, if someone else had already looked over it, that must mean it doesn’t contain anything suspicious. And now that she’s brought it here, and I get the sense she can’t go back unless I open it, I basically have no choice but to open it now.

“...Alright, then. I’ll read it now, if you’ll excuse me. Dahlia, the letter opener, please.”

“Yes.”

I still don’t understand why, but if I have to read this here and now, I suppose I don’t have any objections.

I took the letter opener from Dahlia and neatly opened the envelope.



My beloved Viola,

It will soon be one week that I have been apart from you. I desperately hope you are well...



What.

My eyes drifted away from the letter.

What... is this? It's all lovey-dovey from the get-go. What's with the 'beloved'?! Nope, nope, not gonna go there.

I found myself suddenly nervous.

You've only just started. Pull yourself together, Vi.



You need not worry about my condition, dear Viola, just know that being away from you thus has left me terribly sick—but only in my heart. For the briefest of moments, I glimpsed upon your smiling face just before I awoke this morning, only to feel a terrible pain in my soul when I opened my eyes. I write 'beloved' and yet all I feel, throughout my entire being, is 'sorrow.'



I barely contained a gag.

Oh no. It's so sappy I can practically taste sugar in my mouth. This is a little out of character, even for him. I mean, he's already pretty sappy normally, but this letter has fifty percent higher sugar content.





I am stationed near the border of the kingdom to the south and, as I feared, the heat here is dreadful. It is hot and dry, with miles upon miles of sand and barren land being its most distinguishing features. There is, however, a place something like an oasis on my family's land nearby that provides a large quantity of fruit and minerals. But, O, my sweet Viola, you are the only oasis for me!



I do declare, Mr. Fisalis. You are my— Oh no, now I'm out of character! Ha ha. I would never think that.

That place on the border sounds like a lovely duchy! Even with that awful climate, it certainly seems like they have abundant natural resources! Life sure is different when you're a high-ranking aristocrat... You get actually nice territories and whatnot. Nothing like my family's territory. Ours lies north of the capital, so our crops often freeze. It's cold and dry, so barely anything will grow anyway. Oh, the two territories are similar in that they're both dry, though ☆ ...Not that that makes me happy or anything, I unconsciously corrected myself.

Huh, I never thought I'd be proud of my territory, but now 'my' territory is the duchy.



The kingdom just to the south of the duchy, Aurantia, is so arid that only the most drought-tolerant fauna can survive there. Furthermore, the aforementioned underground vein of mineral deposits runs along our border and Aurantia is forbidden to mine there, as per Flür law.



I felt ever-so-slightly bad for our southern neighbor, between their arid climate and being forbidden to mine for minerals.



Thus, Aurantia frequently invades our kingdom for its natural resources and, in the case of a small-scale skirmish, they can usually be driven back by the

company stationed at the border and the duchy knights under my father's command. Based on our investigations, however, it appears they are now capable of a large-scale invasion, completely unlike those earlier skirmishes.



Just as I thought, they are the bad guys! I've made up my mind on that. And wow, for someone who seems as easy-going and carefree as my father-in-law, it turns out he has a lot of responsibility on his shoulders.



It is proof of what a blessed, wealthy kingdom we are that Aurantia is ever after our bounty. The fruit from our duchy is especially well-known, and distributed around our kingdom, naturally, as well as exported abroad for a high price. We produce an abundant volume of that specific variety....



After that, he rambled on and on about what an extraordinarily wonderful place the duchy was and how it was such an important region, but we'll leave all that out. I guess bragging about his territory comes more naturally to him. Typical.

There were three full pages remaining.

What is this, some sort of punishment? This is more like a travel brochure than a simple letter home. What the heck, Mr. Fisalis? Oh well, I'll just skim it until the end.



...I endeavor to finish my work here as fast as I can so that I may come home to you soon... so take care of yourself, my lovely Viola. Of course, I will write to you regularly, but if you still feel lonely, just look to the south and think of me. I, in turn, will look toward the capital and think of my dearest Viola! Although we may be apart, my heart remains always with you. If nothing else, please remember that.

Farewell for now.

Yours Always, Cercis 

'Yours Always'?! Who does he think he's writing to?!

I was so embarrassed, I think my nose started bleeding!

Why is he trying to act like some kind of Casanova? 'My heart remains always with you' sounds so creepy! Like I have it in a jar or something! And stop writing my name over and over like it's pillow talk!

Mr. Fisalis' letter sent me into such a mental tailspin that I needed a moment to collect myself.

At least he's keeping his spirits up, according to his letter. That part came across loud and clear. I have so, so many questions, though.

Despite my frayed nerves, I somehow managed to finish reading his letter. By the time I was done, I was actually feeling dizzy. Never before had I been handed a piece of mail with such destructive power.

"You said this letter was inspected, right?"

"Yes, the inspectors look them over according to military protocol."

I'm well aware of that, so what's making me feel like I can't... The inspectors. The inspectors read his letter...

"...Did they say... anything when they read it?" I asked the lady knight nervously.

"They looked a little surprised, but no, they didn't say anything! I mean, it's their job," she explained, staring off into space.

Although I understood why it had to be done, just thinking about someone else reading that letter made me dizzy again. I shut my eyes tight and tried to calm myself down.

"Er, may I ask you something?" I asked her. She had not stopped watching me with a lukewarm, critical gaze the whole time.

"What is it?"

"Is Mr. Fisalis actually working all that hard?"

"Y-Yes?!"

"It's just... all he wrote about was how wonderful and tranquil his duchy is

down there..." *And the mushy stuff. So much mushy stuff.*

The mood in the room completely changed the moment I asked.

"He's working *extremely* hard! He's driving us mad! I shudder at the thought!" she cried, her eyes wide.

"Eeep!" I was so startled by her sudden change in attitude that I let out a little scream as my knees gave out, and I collapsed onto the sofa! *You... you didn't need to scare me like that!*

Mr. Fisalis, what in the world are you doing to your subordinates?!

"Are all you knights okay?"

"More or less. But he just comes up with these brutal plans and then makes us run through them to see if they'll actually work in practice! We're like his guinea pigs!

"Mr. Fisalis..."

"And he's all like 'you guys want to go home sooner rather than later, too, don't you?'"

That's definitely something he would say. For sure.

"Which is why everyone wanted to be the messenger. Usually no one wants that job! Riding non-stop overnight is like child's play compared to having to put his strategies into action!"

"But isn't that brutal, too? Having to ride all night at such a fast pace?" I could relate, if only slightly, following my own brutal midnight ride back when we suspected Mr. Fisalis of keeping a secret mistress. I couldn't imagine having to ride at a gallop for longer than that *and* without stopping to sleep. And yet, she said that was the easier option!

"Not in the slightest! It was my absolute pleasure to ride all night just to have tea with you! This is like heaven! Paradise! An oasis! And while I'm on the topic, the other two lady knights also got themselves messenger jobs, so you'll probably be seeing them, too."

"Huh? You all aren't arguing about it anymore?"

“That’s right! Commander said that he’d ‘never let another man visit Viola while he is away’ and what he says goes! Granted, even if he hadn’t decided that, we’d still make sure we got the job, one way or another!” she said with a wink.

That certainly does sound like something he would say, and I don’t doubt the lady knights could easily get what they wanted from the guys. In any case, everyone is still okay out there on the front lines. Mr. Fisalis, very much so. It is clear to me, then, that the knights have a rough road ahead of them.

9 — The Reply

I found out that the lady with blonde hair was named Chamomile. The one with silvery hair was Angelica, and the bronze-haired one was Alkanna.

Mr. Fisalis' letter almost raised more questions than it answered, but at the very least I knew he was safe. What a relief that was. In fact, he seemed to be in such high spirits that he was terrorizing his subordinates! I really felt like I needed to go and apologize to them for his behavior.

As I sat there racking my brain over how I might accomplish such an apology, Chamomile urged me, "Madam, your response, please!" with a smile.

"Oh, yes, you're right." *Stay on task, stay on task. I read the letter specifically so I could write a reply.*

"I can't go back until I have your reply, Madam. Ha ha... not that I particularly want to go back☆" she said with an appropriately cute shrug. *Chamomile! Please take your job more seriously!*

"Nooo, you can't do that!"

"Oh, I can't?" Chamomile responded with a laugh and no trace of guilt.

Well, at least I get that she's joking now, even if I couldn't understand some of the other things she told me earlier. Unless she's not joking now? Oh well, I'll just pretend she didn't say that, either.

Once I had carefully put Mr. Fisalis' letter back into the envelope, I said, "If you'll excuse me, I'll write my reply in my room." I then apologized to Chamomile as I rose from my seat. "I don't have anything here to write with. Rohtas, Mimosa. Wait here while I'm gone."

I didn't have a writing desk or any stationery in the salon anyway, so I would have to go back to my room for a while to bang out the letter. It wasn't as if I was going to write a whole report or something, but I didn't want people just staring at me as I worked!

Oh, wait, forgot about the inspector. Hmm, the only way this letter's going to make it to Mr. Fisalis is if an inspector looks it over for information leaks. In that

case, I should write my reply so it's easy for the inspectors to do their job! I'll make the whole thing nice and clear!

I left the salon with just Dahlia, leaving Mimosa and Rohtas to wait with Chamomile.

"It sure sounds like they're working very hard down there," I said, my shoulders relaxing once the door to the salon was closed, and we were out of sight.

I can't catch a break. All I did was read a simple letter, but it left me feeling completely worn out.

"It certainly seems that way," Dahlia said back with a grim smile, watching me crack my neck.

"Can you gather up the rest of the sweets we have? The same ones we gave Chamomile. I want to be able to send some to Mr. Fisalis and the other knights." Tea cakes were probably in short supply on the front lines. I wanted to send them some small presents in thanks for all their hard work. I owed it to *Mr. Fisalis*, at the very least! That is, a rather large part of me felt terrible for making him worry☆ Sweets perk you right up when you're feeling tired, so hopefully they could cheer him up, too.

"We knew a knight would be coming today, so I believe we already have some prepared. I will go check," Dahlia said casually. *Ahh, I shouldn't have expected anything less from my A-team of servants! I can't believe they thought that far ahead! Seriously, I should ask for all of them to get raises on payday! Who should I ask, though? Oh, duh, Rohtas!*

"Thank you. I'll be in my room if you need me."

"Understood, Madam."

I parted ways with Dahlia just outside the salon—she off to the kitchen, and me hurrying towards my room. *It would be terrible manners to leave my guest waiting for too long!*

Once I returned to my room, I took a stationery set (specially made for the Fisalis family... and left untouched for who knows how long) out of my writing desk and embarked upon my mission of writing an acceptable letter without

delay.

Oh, well, hmm. What to write. As it turns out, my mind was utterly blank.

'We've been having lovely weather here in the capital.' ...Do I need to tell him that?

'I am well. Keep your spirits up and work hard.' ...I just started the letter, but that sounds like it just ended.

'Everyone else at the manor is doing well, too.' ...That sounds like something you'd put at the end, too.

Minutes passed. I was making Chamomile wait.

If I take too long, I'll only make her job more difficult, so I'd better hurry.

...How the heck does one reply to a sappy travel brochure-slash-humble brag letter, though?

Argh, now's not the time to nitpick his letter. Just write something. This piece of paper is still completely blank.

I took my pen from where I'd been balancing it on my upper lip and dipped it in the jar of ink before me, positioning the nib against the spotless white paper.

'Mr. Fisalis,' I'm just gonna skip 'My dearest' or 'My beloved.' Like I'd waste ink on pointless sugarcoating!

'I read your letter. Everyone is relieved to hear that you are well.' Well, I mean, it's true.

'I did not know anything of your duchy near the border, only of my own family's land near the capital, and so found your explanation very informative. If given the chance, I would like to go and see it.' It's not like he could have expected me to know about it—we didn't have the money for parties, much less travel. Mother and Father would have laughed if I mentioned traveling to someone else's territory! I don't actually care if I ever see this other territory, but it sounds polite to say I'd like to.

'I would also like to try the fruit you mentioned, if only to see what it is like. I'll have to ask Rohtas and Cartham to order some!' There's nothing those two can't do if I ask! I'd probably be able to taste them if they can order some to the

manor. But, argh, what a waste of money that would be...

Oh.

I stopped writing. I had been writing at a steady pace, line after line, but I was still only on the first page. And I had barely filled half of it, at that. *There's no way I can fill three whole pages like Mr. Fisalis!*

Can I just... stop here? No, this is way too short, I told myself, conveniently answering my own question, when there was a knock on my door. Dahlia came in, back from inquiring in the kitchen.

"Pardon my intrusion. It seems we do have plenty of sweets. I have packed some for the knight to take with her," she informed me.

"I knew I could count on you. Thank you! Oh, I can add that to my letter."

'I suppose you probably do not have many sweets down there, so I am sending you some with your messenger. I hope you all enjoy them. Cartham made them with love, as he always does, so I am sure they will be delicious! I hope they can make everyone's day a little bit brighter.' *Oooh, yeah, that added a lot! It's satisfying to see the page start to fill up! Even if the words are mostly empty.*

'Please make sure to take good care of yourself! I will be praying for your safe return from here in the capital. Regards, Viola.' *Yes! Done! This ought to be nice and easy for the inspectors*☆

Since the single piece of paper was awfully flimsy, I added a blank second piece. Technically, the single page that the letter was on would have been fine as-is, but I was feeling extra fancy that day! I didn't often have the occasion to use stationery, so that was the excuse I gave myself.

I folded my letter neatly and put it in an envelope, added Mr. Fisalis's name and address as well as a return address, and finished it all off by lightly sealing the envelope with sealing wax. *Phew, done and done. I managed to finish it, somehow.*

"This took longer than I'd expected, so let's not keep Chamomile waiting any longer!"

“Indeed.”

Dahlia and I hurried back to the salon.

A beautifully wrapped package of sweets was waiting for us in front of the salon door. They were baked goods, so while it seemed unlikely that they would be crushed, they were packed tightly into boxes; the boxes were then wrapped in cloth to keep them from jostling around or coming open during the ride.

The two boxes seemed like plenty, but I still asked, “I don’t know how many knights Mr. Fisalis has with him; do you think this will be enough?” *I’d hate to send these and then not have enough for everyone in the division.*

But Dahlia just smiled reassuringly and said, “It was Rohtas giving the directions, so I am sure it will be plenty.” I was satisfied hearing that.

“I’ve got nothing to worry about, then!” And with that, I opened the door to the salon.

Chamomile took the letter from me with a broad smile.

“Until next time, then! My apologies for barging in on you, Madam,” she said as she laid her hand on her chest in the knights’ salute. Outside, she nimbly mounted her white horse with the boxes of cakes secured to the saddle and, tapping her steed with her crop, took off at an impressive gallop, the crisp sound of the horse’s hooves fading into the distance.

Wooow. A real prince on a white horse. She’s too cool. I’m totally spellbound again☆

The pressure on me to quickly write a reply to that slightly—no, *very* mentally taxing letter I had to read, on top of receiving a guest for the first time in so long left me feeling a bit drained. As far as I knew, my work (of being the lady of the house) for the day was done, as per what Rohtas had told me that morning. *Alright, siesta time*, I thought, returning to my room.

Just as I was getting comfortable on my much-loved sofa, however, my in-laws’ maid came to fetch me.

“Madam. If it pleases you, my master and mistress have informed me that they would like to see you.”

“Oh? My father-and mother-in-law?”

“Yes. They are waiting in the salon.”

Although we were all living together on the manor grounds, I had not seen my in-laws since the day prior in the garden. From the very beginning they had told the servants and I to go about our days as usual and not to mind them, so aside from my run-in with them in the garden, they seemed to have been doing fine on their own. Since I wasn't doing anything important, I got up from the sofa and told the maid I would head down to the salon.

It must have something to do with Mr. Fisalis' letter. He is their son, after all, for better or for worse. ...And it really did seem like 'worse,' for a while. I couldn't help but find it sort of charming how they still cared for him so much, even while he was in his lousy son phase. I guess they want to know how their darling boy is doing, I suddenly thought, when I realized I was still holding the letter he'd sent me. I snapped back to reality.

Now wait just a second. Was I going to show them this letter?! Was I seriously about to be like, 'Here you go, Father, Mother Fisalis... Feast your eyes on this jaw-droppingly sappy letter that some poor inspector was forced to read'? I would literally die of embarrassment! ...Ahem.

Phew, I was really starting to lose it there... even though I was the one who had the embarrassing thought in the first place. A-Anyway, even if I was going to show the letter to them, it's not like I was the one who wrote it, right? Mr. Fisalis is the one who should be embarrassed—he wrote the letter! ...Heck, who am I trying to convince?

I could not keep them waiting forever, though (oh no, not more deja vu!), so I frantically straightened my clothes, fixed my hair, and raced down to the salon, the letter still clutched in my hand.

I really, really can't catch a break today.

“I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Father, Mother Fisalis. You both look well!” I greeted them.

“Oh, no need to be so stiff and formal. Have a seat,” my father-in-law urged me, so I daintily sat down in a chair.

No surprise that the two of them are snuggled together on the settee! Time to ignore their PDA just as well as the servants do.

“We heard that an envoy from the military came to see you,” Lord Fisalis said once I had sat down.

“Yes, one of Mr. Fisalis’ knights came.”

“I see! So, what did the letter say?” he asked, excitement written clearly across his face.

“It was mostly about how Mr. Fisalis and his subordinates are faring. I’m relieved to report that they are all doing well,” I replied, casually leaving out the... crazier parts.

“I see, then,” Lord Fisalis continued. “We received a report from Cercis, as well. You can take a look at it, too.” *A report? Do they mean something different than the letter I got?* I cocked my head in confusion as I took the envelope from Lord Fisalis and read the contents.

It was a surprisingly normal—even straight-laced, you might say—report. Today, the battle went like this; now, the enemy is doing that. It wasn’t as if the report was terribly in-depth, but it was still specific enough to be informative, perhaps because it was intended for my father-in-law. Indeed, it was definitely more of a report and less of a letter, per se. And a very fine report at that!

It was written in densely-packed, precise handwriting and spanned exactly one page.

...What, only one page? But mine was three. And it was just bragging and local attractions! Oh, whatever.

I was more staring at the report than reading it at that point; it definitely clearly communicated that Mr. Fisalis and his subordinates were still in good health. The contents were so different that I almost wondered if two different people had written my letter and this report, but the report was written on the same stationery as the letter that had been addressed to me.

There’s no doubt about it, both were written by Mr. Fisalis. But then again, I’m not very familiar with his handwriting. And it’s... unlikely that he had someone else write my letter for him. So it was almost definitely he who wrote my letter.

No, I'm sure of it, Lord Fisalis said it was his from the start.

When I finished reading the report, I handed it back to Lord Fisalis.

"A letter from Cercis came for you too, right, Vi?" Lady Fisalis asked me, her star sapphire eyes shining even more radiantly than usual. Look at her, pretending she doesn't know!

I froze under her arrow-like gaze. Without meaning to, I suddenly remembered what my letter had said and blushed.

This is why I put on a brave face and brought the letter down with me, right? Because I was willing to show it to them, right?

...Well it turns out, I'm still suuuper embarrassed!

My eagle-eyed mother-in-law must have noticed how I was squirming under her gaze, because she then said, "Gracious, Vi, you've turned bright red! That must have been quite the juicy letter! Oh ho ho ho! It's alright, dear, you don't have to show it to us. Just make sure you keep it in a safe place!"

What does she mean by that?! And what woman her age says 'juicy'?! Just a second ago you were acting like you wanted to see it!

Still, I guess I should be glad that I no longer have to show them the letter, thanks to my mother-in-law's offhand remark (made even scarier by the fact that she wasn't very far from the truth).

They were still looking at me like I had a screw loose, though. But if I no longer had to let them read the letter, why did I still feel like I couldn't bear to be in the same room as them a minute longer?

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 2, Cercis' Perspective

— A Long-Awaited Reply ◆ ◆ ◆

A whole week had gone by so quickly since I left the capital for the campaign. I had spent all my time in a tent erected near the border, drawing up operations and finalizing our plans for attack on Aurantia. I was also occasionally doing undercover work in disguise. It was the calm before the storm, since we were still in the planning stage, but before long I would have to turn in an initial report to HQ back at the Royal Palace.

The tent was large, with plenty of space inside. The inside was partitioned off into booths of sorts for the use of the knight commander (I was essentially the commanding officer), the inspectors, and for breaks and meetings. When I entered my booth, I stood and looked at the pen and stationery atop the work desk.

I had written up a report for the Royal Palace as well as one for Father. Both were old hat to me, so I could almost write them in my sleep. I completed them in no time. The real issue was the letter for Viola.

Obviously, I had not seen Viola for a whole week. It was a true tragedy, almost too much to bear. There had to be some way for me to convey all the feelings welling up inside me, threatening to overflow!

The excitement coursing through me was worlds apart from how I felt writing reports, and I let my pen glide agilely across the paper.

First things first—I must let her know how I am doing. I am well, physically-speaking, but emotionally, I am exhausted without her. I should tell her about this region and its climate, too. She's never been to our duchy, after all, and I believe the servants told me she was fond of travelogs back when I was getting some books together for the cottage. Yes, if I'm to write about the duchy, I should play up its strengths.

It's a lovely place, something of an oasis, with abundant agricultural and mineral resources. Fruit grown here sells for a pretty penny in the capital, so perhaps I should send some straight to the manor! Maybe I should write

something about Aurantia, too, while I'm at it.

There, done!

...I think it turned out well!

Maybe it's a little more passionate than I'd planned, but so long as my feelings get across to her, I don't mind.

All that's left is to submit it to the inspector. I'll have them inspect it right away so it can be on its way to the capital later today. Chamomile was supposed to be the envoy today, I think. I'll have to make sure to tell her to take my letter with her.

I proceeded straight to the inspectors' booth to let them examine my letter. Hm? Was I going to lay on the pressure a little bit? Of course!

The inspector must have been surprised to see me, because he shot out of his chair as soon as I stepped in the booth.

"Commander! You don't need to hand-deliver your mail yourself!"

I gestured for him to calm down. "I wasn't busy, and I have a personal message in here, too." I wouldn't want my letter to Viola to get lost in the collection and delivery process.

"You do?"

"Yes. And I want them to be delivered today, too, so make haste."

"Mmhmm... Oh! Oh, goodness! I'm terribly sorry, did you say you want them delivered today?"

"I did. I want them sent to the capital ASAP."

"We'll start with the reports, then—"

"No, with the personal message—The. Personal. Message."

"...Understood, sir."

The point of me bringing my mail to him myself, you see, was so I could have my messages approved ahead of the documents he'd already received. I decided to wait on a chair in the booth until the inspection was complete. *Hurry it up and get them back to me! I need to get them to Chamomile!*

Shortly after he had begun, the inspector's eyes filled with tears—obviously because my emotional letter was so deeply moving. *Ah ha, a man of culture.*

I snatched back my letter from the emotionally-spent inspector the second he approved it and raced off to find Chamomile. *Don't leave until you have my letter, Chamomile!*

"Make sure Viola reads it then and there, and do not even *think* of coming back without a reply from her."

"What? I don't think we should force her to do that, sir," Chamomile grumbled, but she still put my documents in her bag.

"You think I'm going to wait until the next time the mail goes out? I haven't seen Viola for a whole week! I'm emotionally malnourished!"

"...If that's really how you feel, then I suppose."

No, I did not care that I was glaring at her.

Once Chamomile left with my letters, I waited for a reply.

But I wasn't just twiddling my thumbs and waiting. I spent my time researching the enemy, staking out our attack route, and refining our strategy. I wanted to finish my job there and head home as soon as possible, after all.

Two days passed in the blink of an eye as I busied myself with our attack plans and Chamomile returned from the capital. *Great, she's back rather early.*

Chamomile would have to take all of the documents she brought from the Royal Palace to be inspected first. That was the standard procedure. Distributing mail before it was inspected was strictly forbidden. Royal decrees, official documents, letters from friends and family, all had to be thoroughly vetted and, unsurprisingly, personal letters were low priority, so I couldn't be sure when Viola's reply would finally rest in my hands.

Which means that's where my letter is, and it's where I'm headed now.

Arriving at the booth, I knocked as I let myself in, catching the inspector's eye as he was reaching for the freshly delivered pile of mail. Going by how he froze like a cornered rabbit, it seemed like this was going to become a routine whenever I showed my face there.

Oh, but it looks like he's only just now starting. Perfect.

"Inspector. It appears that the mail has arrived. I do believe there should be something for me in there."

"Oh, let me see."

"I think it ought to be something from Vio— my wife." Of the three documents I was expecting—one from the Royal Palace, one from Father, and one from Viola—it was the latter I specifically pointed out. Viola's reply!

"Ah, here it is."

"Inspect it first, if you will. I'll wait."

"Huh?!"

"Pardon?"

"Er, nothing, sir. I'll get to that right away...!" The inspector started to look through the pile for Viola's letter. Figuring it wouldn't take very long, I took a seat in the same chair as last time I paid the inspector a visit. The inspector, however, was staring at me blankly.

Oi, your hands had better not be slowing down.

"Hurry up." He was putting me in a bad mood. All I wanted was to read Viola's letter.

"Y-Yes sir!" The inspector rifled through the mail with renewed urgency.

He handed Viola's letter over to me once it passed muster. I told him there was no rush on the other documents and to take his time before returning them to my office.

I tried to will my hands to be still, but they shook with excitement. I broke the seal emblazoned with my family coat of arms on the envelope and removed the papers. They were lined with beautiful, carefree handwriting. Now that I mention it, that was my first time seeing Viola's handwriting. It was very *her*. Simply seeing it warmed my heart.

Viola said in the letter that she'd like to visit the duchy, try our fruit, and other adorable things. I was a little... no rather, perturbed that she thought to ask

Rohtas and Cartham instead of me about ordering some fruit. *I can arrange to have some sent to the manor right now! I'll call a courier when I'm done.*

She casually mentioned that she was glad to hear that I was doing well. I always knew she had a caring side. *She's praying for my safe return? Well then, I guess I had better be extra careful to not get injured!*

Her letter, although she must have written it at a moment's notice, was written in neat, flowing handwriting, and in many of the lines her heartfelt desire for me to return home and end her loneliness seemed to spill off the page.

I could feel my energy replenished as I munched on the cakes from Viola that Chamomile had handed out. *There! My willpower has returned!*

Several days later:

I happened to run into Corydalis just as I was passing by the inspectors' booth; he was just leaving it.

"What're you doing here?" *Are you waiting on an inspection, too?* I wondered.

"Ah, uhhh, just getting some valuable pointers for life?"

"What?" *Why the hell would you talk to the inspector about that? Am I not working him hard enough?*

"Yeah... life stuff... you know, like, relationships?"

"Huh?" *The more he says the less I understand him.*

"Er, yeah. That sort of thing. If you happen to know anyone, Commander, introduce them to the inspector, will you?"

"Uh... huh. I have no idea what you're talking about, but I think I understand."

What just happened?

10 — A Return to Normal “That Mr. Fisalis... no matter where he goes, he’s always the same.”

I was drinking tea and relaxing in the salon after another tearful dinner alone in our stupidly big dining room. The arrival of my in-laws and Chamomile during a period of otherwise next to no guests had left me absolutely beat. And on top of everything, that letter! My brain was fried.

Perhaps hoping it would help my recovery, Dahlia offered me some sweets as I drank the tea she had brewed for me. They were the same little cakes I’d given Chamomile to take with her. We had so many, I had even split them among the servants, too. As could be expected of anything Cartham made, they truly healed the body and soul. And the taste! It was out of this world!

This is the life! Lying around, eating cake!

“He certainly is. We servants, too, were put at ease to learn he was in good health,” Rohtas replied calmly.

Oh? Hm, I guess it makes sense that they would. Even though Rohtas has faith in Mr. Fisalis and the knights, he must have felt a sense of relief today when he heard from the report how Mr. Fisalis was doing.

“Speaking of the letter, he talked a lot about his duchy in the south. He said the local specialty there was fruit. And what was the other thing...? Oh, yes, the mining industry. I wonder if that’s where those famous beef-blood rubies come from.” I hadn’t been terribly interested in the contents of the letter as I had read it, so I sort of struggled to remember the details. I was thinking of the ruby my mother-in-law had given me as a souvenir but...

“That would be a pigeon-blood, Madam. And in that case, they are another duchy’s specialty. Our southern’s duchy’s claim to fame is diamonds.”

Wow, I didn’t remember any of that right. Thank you for correcting me without making a big deal out of it, Rohtas!

So, the mines in the southern duchy are famous for their diamonds, then. I bet

those are really expensive, too.

“Whoa! Diamonds, who would have thought?” Is there anything that duchy doesn’t have? Aren’t they maybe monopolizing this kingdom’s produce industry, though?

“Mm. But in terms of rarity value, the pigeon-blood rubies are more valuable because there are fewer of them produced,” Rohtas politely explained.

That duchy sounds amazing! They have a hand in everything from agriculture to mining, no economic weaknesses! Their finances must be in great shape, too! Not that I really care about fancy gems all that much.

“He wrote about how strong local fruit production is in the south, but he didn’t specify what kind. Are they not frequently seen here in the capital?” I don’t think I’ve seen them at my favorite greengrocer or fruit stand, anyway. Whenever they got some famous produce in, it was always prominently displayed, complete with a high price tag. Those were for rich people, though! I always got an aggressive ‘these aren’t for you peasants!’ feeling from those displays. Er, at any rate, those fruits never touched my lips.

“Correct. Distribution in neighboring kingdoms is given precedence.”

Exporting them would bring in profits, though! That would be a good business decision.

“I see, I see. I’ve just wanted to try some ever since I read about them in Mr. Fisalis’ letter. But now I hear they’re not distributed in the capital. Oh well.” I wanted to try some if I could get them here, but it’s not as if I absolutely have to have them, or that they’re something worth inconveniencing anyone to get. I’ll abandon that plan here and now.

But...

“If you would like to sample some, I can arrange to have them brought here,” Rohtas said offhandedly.

“Huh? You mean you can get some?”

“Of course. I can provide you anything our duchy produces, if you so desire it, Madam,” he said with one of his usual reassuring smiles.

And that was when it finally hit me that I had made it to the big leagues. *Let me just take back what I said before.*

“In that case, I would like to try some!”

“As you wish, Madam,” Rohtas replied with a polite bow before exiting the salon.

The next morning:

As I was eating my breakfast alone, radiating my now constant gloomy aura, the doorman called for Rohtas, “Sir. There’s a messenger in the entrance.”

“A messenger? Where could they have come from?” Rohtas mumbled with raised eyebrows. Apparently, we were not expecting any guests that day. It was unusual to see Rohtas caught unprepared, so I observed in silence.

“Yes sir. It’s from the Royal Palace. He brought a royal decree as well.” The doorman presented the envelope that the messenger had delivered. Rohtas and the doorman’s conversation was happening right by the entrance, so I couldn’t hear much of what they said, but I caught a glimpse of a white envelope.

I saw Rohtas quickly inspect its contents. “I see. Let us take a look. Pardon me for just a moment, Madam,” he called to me in apology before walking out the door.

“Sure thing. Oh, I’m alone again...” I muttered to the nearly empty dining room. With Rohtas gone, it was suddenly down to just Dahlia and Mimosa.

“I wonder what it could be, coming from the Royal Palace? It seemed urgent, too,” I wondered aloud to them.

“I wonder, too. But you have nothing to worry about, Madam, with Rohtas taking care of things,” Dahlia replied.

“You’re probably right...”

Rohtas abruptly returned while Dahlia and I were discussing the arrival of the royal messenger.

“Oh, that was quick. What did the royal messenger want, then?”

“Lord Fisalis is to appear at the palace at once, so I’ve sent a servant to the cottage.”

A royal messenger came for my father-in-law? I guess that shouldn’t be too surprising. It’s not like the message was addressed to me!

“Father Fisalis? Hmm, I wonder why.” *He’ll probably come here soon, so I’ll find out then.*

I finished my breakfast in a hurry.

When I went out to the carriage porch to receive my in-laws after the servant retrieved them, a messenger carriage from the Royal Palace had been pulled up beside it.

“Your Father’s been called away for a war council, so we’ll have to go to the Royal Palace for a little while,” my mother-in-law told me gently. She was dressed to the nines and looked all ready to go.

As she turned and elegantly lifted her foot to step up into the carriage, my father-in-law complained, “I don’t really want to go... No one’s listening to me, are they? I’m supposed to be retired!” as his own servant and the messenger resolutely trotted along behind my mother-in-law.

“Whatever you say, sir. Of course you’re retired. But when His Majesty himself calls for you, you can’t exactly tell him no,” the royal messenger humored him. *The messenger must be an old acquaintance if he’s joking around with him like that, considering he’s a former duke!*

“Come along now, my lord, enough grumbling.”

“Nooo! I’d rather be doing anything but this!”

Everyone ignored his pleas, and even I pretended not to hear him.

“I know, dear, I know. I’ll be with you the whole time. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can leave,” Lady Fisalis snickered over her shoulder as she watched my father-in-law’s meltdown.

“Of course you say that, you’re only going to be having tea with the queen consort!” he said back to her with an envious look in his eyes.

“But it’s my job to cheer on my husband from the inner palace! I’m not just

laughing and drinking tea, you know. Get in the carriage, dear. See you, Vi! I don't know when we'll be back, so tell them not to make dinner for us!" Lady Fisalis called to me with a smile, paying no attention at all to her husband's whining.

Ah, I feel something stabbing me. No, really, I think I've been stabbed! My mother-in-law's brutal rebukes against my father-in-law were so sharp, even I felt them! 'Words like knives' is a common saying among women, right? Whoever thought of it, I think I understand what they mean now. ...This is why I hate sociali— I mean, I'm just no good at small talk, and besides, Rohtas always says you don't need to be happy and spunky all the time...

Lady Fisalis must have noticed my look of alarm, because she then said, "Oh, goodness, please don't look so gloomy, Vi. There's no point in trying to change something that can't be changed. To be honest, I rarely hold tea parties completely voluntarily, and if I'm invited to one, I'm rather forced to go, you know? The same goes for parties," she added, attempting to patch things up with a smile.

"I understand," I replied stiffly. *She really drove that point home.*

With that, she waved goodbye to me as she took her seat in the carriage and shut the door.

"I'll let Cartham know you won't be here for dinner. Have a nice time!"

"I'll try!" my father-in-law turned around to say back to me, which was very kind of him, considering *he* was not going voluntarily.

—

It was dead silent in the manor, like the calm after a storm.

"Will they be back very late, do you think?" I asked Rohtas, as I was having some tea in the salon.

"The summons was for a Royal Council, so I expect they will return no earlier than evening. I presume they will be eating dinner there as well. Or rather, that is what I gathered from the royal decree."

"Seems like it. So... how about we have dinner like. We. Normally. Do?"

No response.

Oh ho, I see you dodging my gaze, you sneaky man.

“What do you say?” I pressed, changing my position so I could force eye contact.

“...Well. I suppose...” he reluctantly agreed, not even trying to hide how much he wanted to say no. *Oh, come on! Don’t be like that! Er, no, wait. It would be super weird if you weren’t like that.*

We were back to normal!

“Eh he he he he! Back to our old routine!”

“...So it seems. I had a feeling you would suggest that,” he sighed resignedly.

“I may not be in my uniform, but I can still act like I normally dooo,” I sang to myself as I polished the windows with camellia oil.

I just couldn’t hold back from trying to polish those windows until they shone like diamonds! I delighted in the squeaking sound my fingers made when I ran them over the window panes. *Oh, how I’ve missed this work!*

“Oooh! I wanna do the laundry next! And de-wrinkle the sheets!” *The Fisalis Manor Secret Technique: Human Iron no Jutsu!* I am of course referring to our method of flapping the wrinkles out of our bed linens without using a steam iron.

They’re dried quickly by the air passing through them and the wrinkles are pressed out by the pressure from moving up and down; since there’s air moving all through them, they come out nice and soft. A wonderful secret technique to be sure! I was very impressed by this method when I first saw it upon moving into the manor.

It takes six people to do, and I never get tired of it! I wish I could bounce on top of the sheet as it wafts up and down, but, alas, I know that’s impossible. What’s that? How do I know... if I’ve never tried?

“Alright, Madam? Could you please take that corner?”

“Sure!”

“Is everyone ready?”

“Ready!” we all replied.

“On the count of three! One, two!”

Fwah-pa! Fwah-pa!

The snow white sheet filled with air and reflected the sunlight under the bright blue sky. *What a refreshing sight!*

“Doing this after so long really tires you out, but... boy, does it feel good!”

We raised and lowered the sheet in time with our breathing. It takes a lot of muscle to get wet sheets flying, but seeing them all dry out wrinkle-free makes for a fantastic recharge! And it’s great exercise! I felt a little sad, though, doing these things we usually did when Mr. Fisalis was around, so when evening came, I called it quits. It was startling how I had gotten used to him being around.

“I knew I should have worn my uniform. I got my dress all sweaty and dusty,” I said to myself as I got changed in my room after we were done. I had worked up such a sweat doing the laundry that I thought I had better change for dinner.

“Er, but Madam? You were only wearing one of your usual dresses today. What does it matter that you got it dirty?” Closet Commander Mimosa asked disapprovingly at the mention of my uniform making a return.

“It just does? You don’t care when *your* uniform gets dirty, do you?”

“No, but... What would you do if the former duke and duchess suddenly came back?”

“That would be a problem, wouldn’t it?” I crossed my arms in thought over what Mimosa said.

“Please don’t go overboard with any ideas,” she jabbed. *Just ignore her.*

“If something were to change, with my father-and mother-in-law, we would get a message about it, right? We’d be in the clear. It’s no different than what we usually do!” There were maids assigned to wait on my mother-in-law at the cottage, after all. My in-laws told me they were fine on their own, but they would still need help from time to time, so we had a group of three servants in

rotation at the cottage for them.

Oh! Another rotation system at the cottage! No, but this is different than the last time, this time, everyone's actually happy to work there. That, and my in-law's movements are reported in detail to Rohtas and Dahlia back in the main house. And that's as close to any forewarning as we're going to get.

The same could be said for when Mr. Fisalis and I came home after our date.

"So as long as we keep up appearances, she should be just fine! It's worked until now, hasn't it? All I need to do is transform once we get word that they're on their way home! Should we call it the In-Law Shift?"

What, why are you staring at me like that, Mimosa?

"Alrighty then, let's do it this way starting tomorrow!" I'll just assume your silence is a 'yes'! Heh heh heh, now that's what I call positive thinking!

It turned out that my father-in-law had to go to the Royal Palace every day after that. It looked like a kidnapping every time. The royal messenger who came the first day continued to come to the manor every morning after that, and when I saw how bluntly he spoke to my father-in-law and assumed they were old friends and eventually found out that the messenger was a former subordinate of his.

That explains why he can manhandle... I mean, why he knows my father-in-law like the back of his hand!

And so every morning, their little scene, their little *battle* scene, unfolded before their attendance at the palace. *You deserve a raise, royal messenger.*

Every morning, my mother-in-law went along with them to the palace, too. I got the feeling he'd only go if she went, too. He was like a spoiled little boy! ...But that didn't have anything to do with me, so I'll spare you the details.

I understand that my mother-in-law had tea and whatnot with the queen consort every day. She always said, "this is just part of my job☆" but unlike her husband and his job, she actually seemed to enjoy it.

And I, after seeing them off with a big smile, would run excitedly back to my room.

“Hmm, what chore shall I tackle today?”

I really wasn't made for the celebrity life!

11 — Showing Restraint

“Hmm-hmm-hmmm, good-bye weeeeds,” I hummed as I did my daily gardening.

Until today, I had primarily been just helping out in the garden, but recently I’ve been doing more looking after my own personal corner of it. The flowers Mr. Fisalis bought for me have been doing well and have bloomed beautifully. And just like Bellis told me, I’ve been able to enjoy them time after time as they wither and bloom again. That’s why I’ve got to stay on top of my weeding—for the sake of these lovely flowers! If this flower bed ends up looking ugly because of some weeds by the time Mr. Fisalis comes home, I won’t be very happy at all!

Once my flower bed was nice and weed-free, I wandered into the rest of the garden.

My mother-in-law had given my gardening her approval. So, while I was able to continue my gardening in triumph, I still couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d be in trouble if my in-laws caught me doing other housework. I did that on the down-low, I guess you could say. I’m sure we all would have been in panic mode if they came home unexpectedly!

I started every day that my in-laws weren’t at the manor with some weed-pulling after breakfast, and then once the garden had been tidied up, I would choose some flowers to decorate with. Once I’d made my decision, I’d take them inside the house and wander around for a bit. I would do this and that around the manor until noon, in other words, my *usual routine*. I could do this because my in-laws were out of the house! Which meant that I could eat with the servants in their dining room as per my *usual routine*, too! I endured my lonely breakfasts, knowing that if I waited, I could have a fun lunch with the servants.

My in-laws’ absence also means I can eat more casual, less fancy food. It’s still just as delicious, though. What’s the point of having Cartham here if you’re barely going to use him, er, I mean, making Cartham cook the same darn things, over and over, will only dull his skills!

I don't mean to suggest that my in-laws were eating at the Royal Palace before they came home every day, though. Cartham cooked for them then, too, so I wondered if he wasn't being overworked. Actually, on the days when my in-laws were around, I swear that even the servants' meals tasted a smidgen more luxurious.

But I've already gone on enough about our food situation.

I'd end up looking for things to do after lunch. And then, tragically, come evening, I had to stop my cleaning and odd jobs. Of course, whenever my in-laws ate dinner at the palace, I had my own dinner with the servants! Those days sure felt like some sort of special treat.

The way I went about my days while they were away at the palace was similar to how I had spent my time when Mr. Fisalis was at home, so the real problems emerged when they never left at all. I never knew when they were going to emerge from the cottage!

When they were headed toward the manor, one of the maids assigned to the cottage would come to the main house to warn me, just as I had arranged beforehand.

"Former duke and duchess incoming!"

This was our cue that the In-Law Shift was about to begin.

Upon hearing thus, we would reply, "Roger!" and I would straighten out my clothes, and Mimosa would quickly do my hair and makeup. It was pretty unbelievable, really, that Mimosa's skills were so amazing she could pull it all off under such a time crunch. *It's no exaggeration to say that there's nobody better than Mimosa when it comes to makeup and hair. Even Dahlia is no match for her in those fields.*

Oh, that reminds me. When my mother-and father-in-law were at the manor, I had to go without my uniform. You can only change your clothes so fast, after all. I chose to wear clothes in colors that hid dirt well and were easy to move in. I would have felt bad for Dahlia and Mimosa if I pushed to have things my own way, so I settled on that instead of wearing my uniform. *You don't need nearly as much time when you're just doing hair and makeup!*

The other maids prepared tea in the salon.

It was all a piece of cake compared to our previous Cercis Shift. All I had to do was fix my clothes and makeup and have some tea made! These were only last-minute fixes, though, so I had to rely on my acting ability and innocent face when I greeted them as they walked over through the garden.

“Father and Mother Fisalis, you both look well today!”

“Deliveryyy!” It had been three days since one of Mr. Fisalis’ lady knights had shown up and I’d sent a message back with her.

“Madam, a messenger from Master has arrived,” Rohtas called.

“A what?!” My in-laws were in the manor that day, so I was sewing quietly in my room. It was another patchwork project, my specialty. It wasn’t just surprise visits from my in-laws we had to prepare for, but from messengers, too, so my uniform was still taking a little vacation in the closet for the time being.

But enough about my uniform.

I rushed to the entrance, still frazzled over the sudden appearance of a messenger, to find Alkanna, the bronze-haired lady knight, standing there, smiling radiantly in her knight’s uniform. At her feet were two burlap bags. The bags were so big I wasn’t sure even a grown man could have carried them and, based on how bumpy they were on the outside, they must have been stuffed full of angular items. The bags looked like they could just barely be tied shut.

“How do you do, Alkanna? Do you have another letter for me today?”
Another one after only three days? I thought you were busy, Mr. Fisalis.

“No. Well, I do have a letter for you, but I’m mostly here to bring the fruit you requested,” she said, pointing to the sacks lying at her feet.

Is she serious? I felt dizzy for a split second.

“Um... did you say fruit?” *Since when did I request fruit? Oh, I did ask Rohtas about possibly getting some, now that I think of it! But, that’s weird. I don’t think Rohtas told Mr. Fisalis to send any. If anything, Rohtas would just arrange to get some from one of our usual tradesmen.*

I looked over toward Rohtas as I thought to myself how unlikely that scenario

seemed, and sure enough, he also looked perplexed. His expression confirmed my suspicion that this wasn't the result of our earlier conversation in the salon.

So, then, what was it...?

"Ah!" I suddenly remembered something.

"Madam?"

"Is something wrong?" Rohtas and Alkanna asked at the very unladylike sound I'd let out.

"Oh, haha. Nothing at all," I laughed in a fluster, trying to hide what I was thinking. *She must have read my letter and saw where it said, 'I would also like to try the fruit you mentioned, if only to see what they are like.' ...I didn't really mean that literally, though! That must be it—she thought I honestly wanted to try some of the fruit. Oh no.*

Alkanna produced an envelope from her breast pocket just as before, saying, "This is the letter," as she handed it to me.

Yes, yes it is. And you're expecting a reply, too, I imagine.

"Ah, another already, I see."

"Yes, ma'am."

They must really have a lot more free time down there than they're letting on. Especially considering how thick this one is.

"Oh, I'll need a response from you this time, too!" Alkanna said to me with one of her wonderful smiles.

Based on what I'd been told last time, their mission wasn't public knowledge, but rather being carried out behind the scenes. So it seemed they still had some free time. *It's still nice to know that Mr. Fisalis and Co. aren't in danger. What I'd like the most is for him to come home without getting involved in a war, but I know that's a pipe dream.*

Mr. Fisalis' letter mirrored this sentiment. By and large, his letter was a smorgasbord of the same honeyed words as before, as well as a lecture on the local produce. As well as how delicious they were, he talked in detail about how the fruit was cultivated, which I didn't think was much use to me.

So, another travel brochure, another fruit lecture, and I was no closer to understanding what it was Mr. Fisalis wanted from me.

For the time being, I hurried to write another reply that would not give the inspector too hard of a time to approve. *Of course, this time even general niceties, like 'I'd love to see X' and 'I'd like to try Y sometime' are off limits now! It's a big weight off my chest, though, to know that I don't have to write dumb stuff like 'I'd love to see your gem stones.'*

When I finished my response, I went back to the salon to entertain Alkanna and my in-laws. I didn't have time to prepare any sweets for them while they waited, since I hadn't been expecting anyone, so I rushed over to a well-known confectioner's and bought a boxed set of cakes as a stopgap.

Pleeease don't show up unannounced!

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 3 — My Delightful (?) Correspondence with Mr. Fisalis ◆ ◆ ◆



Dearest Viola,

Thank you for your reply. I am terribly sorry to have rushed you, but I could not bear the thought of being without you for a moment longer.

As soon as I laid eyes on your handwriting—it looked exactly as I imagined it—I felt as though you were here with me and my weariness lifted. Your letters are worth more than gold to me. I will treasure them and keep them close.

It was plain to see from the spaces between your lines that you are lonely without me there. Good husbands are responsible for ridding their wives of such feelings as quickly as possible, are they not? But since we are not yet at a stage where we can go public with our operations, it appears as though our work will take more time.

In truth, I want to see you so desperately that I would even take on the position of messenger myself, but regrettably, I am not permitted to do so. It is the promise of seeing you again that keeps me working my hardest, despite the pain! I can imagine how lonely you must be, but please, try to endure it just a little while longer.

Oh, yes. I sent you some fruit from the duchy as per your letter. I reckon that they will be perfectly ripe by the time they arrive, so be sure to eat them soon once they do. I can send more if there are not enough. Since I am the one sending them, please do not hesitate to ask me for more. There is no need for you to bother Rohtas or Cartham!

The large, round, red ones are... [There was a lengthy description here about what the fruits were like and how to eat them that I took the liberty of omitting.]

I urge you to take care of yourself while I am away.

Yours, Cercis



“...The spaces between my lines didn’t mean anything...”

12 — The Significance of the Sacks

After we showed Alkanna out, we all gathered again in the salon. We decided that we'd might as well eat the fruit that Mr. Fisalis so graciously sent.

"She brought so much... I swear I heard the floorboards creak when she put the bags down. Just how much did that boy cram in there? Oh well, Rohtas, open them up," Father Fisalis said in wonder as he looked at the sacks.

"As you wish, sir." Rohtas tried to untie the cords holding the sacks closed at my father-in-law's request, but they were tied rather tightly and for all his ingenuity, Rohtas could not open them.

"Can't open it? He tied them much too tightly... I see, yes. We didn't get a report this time, either."

"It's that tradition," Mother Fisalis murmured.

"The inspectors likely would have inspected the parcels based on what was written in any letter that came with it, so perhaps it really is just that," Rohtas seemed to agree.

"You're probably right. There should be an announcement soon, too," said my father-in-law.

"That does seem likely, sir."

My father-in-law confirmed something as he watched Rohtas grapple with the cords. My mother-in-law, who was in turn looking at my father-in-law, seemed to understand what he meant.

I can't make heads or tails of what he and Rohtas are talking about. What's the koji in "ano koji"? Is it some foreign language? Oh, wait, am I the only one who missed the memo? Crud.

Looks like I'm the only one who doesn't understand, and I really, really have no clue what's happening. Hello? Can someone fill me in? It's really not that hard to make sure everyone's on the same page, I said to myself helplessly at my lack of understanding.

"Oh, no need for you to worry about this, Vi," my mother-in-law said, trying

to soothe my nerves.

“Huh? Uh, but...” I tried to object when her attempt only made the situation more awkward for me.

“That’s right, it’s nothing for you to worry yourself over. Ah, yes. There was a letter for Viola, if I’m not mistaken. What was it he said?” Lord Fisalis commented offhandedly, neatly changing the subject.

Although I felt myself flush at the thought of Mr. Fisalis’ sappy letter, I nipped that train of thought in the bud and took it upon myself to introduce the various fruits.

After that, I received a letter from Mr. Fisalis every three or four days. They seemed to be sent at the same time as reports to the Royal Palace. I had no idea he was such a good correspondent and found it hard to write decent replies so frequently.

Every single one of his letters, without fail, were tooth-rottingly sweet. *That poor inspector*. After three weeks of this, I started to get a feel for his letters and my in-laws’ habits, and everything began to feel more natural, even though I couldn’t say that I liked it. I hate to say that I’d gotten used to it, but I kind of had!

My in-laws’ behavior, however, was much more unpredictable than Mr. Fisalis’. He had left for the palace in the morning and had not returned until evening, or even night sometimes, which had left us plenty of time to prepare for the Cercis Shift. My in-laws were nothing like that. They usually left in the morning and returned in the evening, but every so often they would come back in the afternoon. And then, on top of that, they often strolled in through the glass door facing the garden.

Just the other day, even, a servant ran into the main dining room while I was scrupulously polishing the silverware and told me, “Madam, the former duke and duchess are almost here!”

“Oh no!”

“Please hurry, Madam!”

Moments later, Mimosa was rushing to my side to do my hair and makeup.

She undid my braids before pulling my hair up in an impromptu chignon. She secured the twist with a barrette and probably broke a world record for fastest updo. I was oohing and ahing over Mimosa's handiwork when my in-laws came in through the glass door.

"Why, hello there, Vi. What are you doing in the dining room?" Lady Fisalis asked.

"We saw you in here so we thought we'd stop by."

I had just made it, but only within a hair's breadth! I smiled widely back at them with vibrant cherry pink lips, courtesy of Mimosa.

"How are you today, Father Fisalis, Mother Fisalis? Dahlia has been giving me dining etiquette lessons today."

"Madam has essentially mastered everything already, but daily brush ups are always important when one must be a perfect lady at all times," Dahlia lied for me. Fortunately for us, she thought to tell it when our silverware was laid out on the table, as if ready for a meal. Judging from appearances, it certainly did seem that I was receiving a typical lady's dining etiquette lesson from her!

"Oh, I see. You'll be perfect in no time with Dahlia instructing you! Be sure to study hard!" Lady Fisalis sounded encouraging, although it hurt a little inside to deceive her.

"I suppose we'll take another walk then. Sorry for barging in like that, Dahlia," Lord Fisalis apologized briefly. Apparently they had nothing else on the schedule for the day.

"Not at all," Dahlia replied as my in-laws left through that same glass door.

"Phew! That was a close one!" I sighed once the two of them were out of sight, finally dropping my proper wife act and already feeling worn out. "We had no time to prepare today, either."

"Thank goodness we were already in here with the silverware out..." Mimosa added as the three of us collapsed into chairs.

"It's almost thrilling, I guess you could say? Sneaking around to do our work so they don't see us really gets your adrenaline pumping, right?" The feeling as

if we were playing hide-and-seek, always on the verge of being caught, did kind of excited me.

“I don’t think so,” they replied bluntly in tandem. I was the odd one out... as usual.

Over a month after Mr. Fisalis had left for his campaign, news of the outbreak of war with the neighboring country spread across the capital. It seemed as though they had not been able to avoid conflict in the end.

Did the sack of fruit that had arrived a few days prior have some sort of connection to it all? My father-in-law had said, back when it had just arrived, that something would be made public soon.

We’re really about to go to war. I hope you’ll be alright, Mr. Fisalis...

13 — A War Has Begun With our southern neighbor's declaration of war, fighting seemed imminent. The aristocracy was informed of this turn of events via royal decree, and the commoners by royal proclamation in front of the palace and through newspapers.

"A month to get everything in place, eh? Looks like those fellows really didn't hold back," my father-in-law said as he fiddled with the envelope that the decree had been delivered in. *Are you sure you want to do that to a royal decree?*

"So it seems. Once the front line troops march in, though, they should have the whole place under control in a jiffy. It's only a matter of time." My mother-in-law, in turn, was nimbly folding a flower out of the paper the decree was written on. *Are you sure you want to do that to a royal decree?*

Neither of them appeared at all concerned. In fact, they were sipping their tea and smiling like this was any other day. *They're talking like we've already won. The war's only just started—heck, there hasn't even been any direct confrontation, it said!*

"Um... Thinking back to past wars, I'm familiar with how strong the Flür military is, and I'm sure that they will win this one, too, but even so, don't you think you're being a little..." I spoke up nervously, interrupting their conversation.

"Ah. Well. I suppose it's good that you think that. But to be more precise, the only thing that the other country has going for it is its fighting spirit, really... just an overall hot-blooded attitude, really. They don't have any actual strategies—goodness, they don't even have any actual *strategists*. They might win a few skirmishes at first by sheer force, but the tables will soon turn once they're up against some real tactics, and they'll lose in the end. No matter how daring and

brave their generals may be, they have no real discipline as an army, so they're not so scary if you can get them cornered. And then, if their intel is outdated, that would mean that there's no information getting in, either," my father-in-law politely explained, if not in slightly more detail than I was expecting. *He must be able to stay so level-headed from all the battles he's commanded.*

Anyway, even to a civilian like me, it seemed pretty impulsive of them to start a war. No way they could come up with strategies if they didn't have any strategists. *Attacking with nothing but a will to fight? Guys, that'll get you an insurrection at best and suicide at worst!*

As if he read my mind, Lord Fisalis continued, "We won last time, and if you take a look at other countries, it's the same story. They picked fights and lost at their own game, time after time," he snorted.

I'm certain that the earlier skirmish—the one that made us have to postpone our wedding!—ended with the Flür Kingdom as the victor. It seems like that place usually loses, too, when they fight other kingdoms. It sort of makes you wonder if those blockheads ever learn. You'd think they'd notice a pattern if they just stopped and, well, thought about it. It's evidence that they must not care about their soldiers or citizens. They'll exhaust all their resources at this rate.

Then, my father-in-law said with a smile, "I used to wonder if maybe *this time* around they'll have come up with a battle plan, but it seems like they never do. Like rats in a bag. I'm thankful our kingdom knows what it's doing. All that's left for us is to put them down."

The war, however, was happening quite far from the capital. And since I rarely left the house, I didn't keep up with what was happening at all. What did I have to worry, though, when it was business as usual at the manor! Time went by exactly as it always did, and I never felt ill at ease. It was like I was living apart from the rest of the world, with my only source of outside information being the tradesman who regularly came to the house.

With my uniform still on vacation in my closet, I was able to continue my chats with said tradesman, as well as Cartham and Rohtas, in the servants' dining room by wearing regular clothes that just *resembled* a maid's uniform. Thinking about it, ever since the uproar over a potential mistress, the

tradesman had stopped sharing rumors with the maids (including me). Maybe he regretted doing so in the first place. But that is neither here nor there.

“...it’s because they don’t have any sort of regulation at the moment.”

“What will happen to the foodstuffs we order from Aurantia?”

“There are other ways to get those, so it should be fine.”

It’s not like we buy all that much from them anyway. The war is the hot topic around town, but if it’s not going to impact us in any way, life can go on as usual. I imagine the families of the soldiers are pretty on-edge, though.

“Oh, speaking of which, the duke is down there right now, is he not? Madam must be worried,” I heard one maid say to another while I was talking ingredients with Cartham and the tradesman. *What’s that? Why, I’m just drinking my tea. I only overheard her by sheer coincidence!*

“That kingdom has nothing going for it, so cutting off diplomatic ties with them isn’t exactly a bad thing, to tell the truth. It’s sort of depressing how eager they are to start a war. But you know what they say, you can’t learn without making mistakes.” The tradesman echoed my father-in-law’s opinion that victory for Flür was all but guaranteed.

The optimism among the citizens of Flür felt reassuring.

14 — Plans for the Day

The day after news of Aurantia's declaration of war spread across the capital:

I had paused to think after another unhappy breakfast alone in the dining room when Rohtas came in and said, rather stiffly, "Pardon my intrusion, Madam, but I would like to go over today's schedule with you."

"Wha—?" I replied, unable to stop the stupid sound from leaving my mouth. I was especially not cut out for my job as a duchess that morning.

I didn't think I had anything planned that was important enough for my butler to formally remind me of it in the morning. He doesn't need to be so formal if it's just a guest or something. He couldn't possibly mean to tell me 'today you will be pulling weeds all morning and then, after lunch, we shall sneak you in with the other maids to assist with the laundry,' right? Or killing time with the new hires, or something?

What could it be, then? Why's he being so polite?

"About. Today's. Schedule. Madam," Rohtas repeated at me, enunciating each word, when I only stared back at him blankly. His tone brought me back to reality frightfully fast.

"Aren't we back to normal, though? I pull some weeds, pick flowers to decorate the manor with, do that, and then clean and help dry the sheets, if no one's around to see me?" I asked him, just to be sure, but he silently shook his head and replied:

"No, Madam. There is a state function today, so you will have to attend."

"...What?! Nobody told me about that!" That information came out of nowhere. *What the heck!*

It was a shock to my system, like a cold shower in the early morning, but Rohtas did not seem to notice and carried on matter-of-factly.

"There is to be a deployment ceremony this morning at the Royal Palace before the king and queen. When that is finished, a military rally will be held as a sort of luncheon. I understand it will be in the form of a garden party."

Hold up. What's a deployment ceremony? And a military rally? I sure would have appreciated an earlier warning about a state function! Why did you foist this on me all of a sudden?! I mean, this means I have to go out in public, right?! But Mr. Fisalis isn't even here—he's away on business. Do they expect me to go to this event by myself?

...Umm... ahem. Get it together.

I was positively reeling with anxiety. It was almost like a large question mark floated over my head as I stood there gaping at the thought of attending a public event.

"It was mentioned in yesterday's royal decree," Rohtas said calmly.

"Oh... I... I thought that decree didn't concern me... I just assumed only Lord and Lady Fisalis needed to read it." *Not to mention Lady Fisalis also made origami out of it. I didn't even have a chance to read it.*

"Please calm down, Madam," Dahlia said, unable to stand idly by while I had a panic attack, as she handed me some water. *Oh, thanks, this will help.*

"The deployment ceremony is the tradition in which His Majesty gives the official command to the Ministry of War to dispatch the troops. Only after receiving his official command can the army march out," Rohtas explained to me as I drank the cup of water.

The Minister of War was the one with the most responsibility in the military and also the highest ranking commander. The royal guard and frontline troops were organized beneath him, with Mr. Fisalis' special division being part of the frontline troops. There was much more to his position, but I'll just leave you with that.

"Huh? Isn't Mr. Fisalis' division already at work down there?" *What's the point of an official dispatching ceremony when soldiers are already on the scene?*

"Master's unit is an exception. The military cannot be deployed en masse without an official command. A ceremony was performed earlier for a much smaller, limited number of soldiers."

"Oh, I see."

“Since war has actually been declared now, however, a more ostentatious ceremony is to be held to inspire the soldiers.”

“That makes sense,” I nodded in agreement.

“Common etiquette dictates that the head of the family should be the one to attend, but since Master is unfortunately absent, you will have to go in his stead...” Rohtas said with a meaningful glance my way.

“Nonononononono, there’s no way!” I interrupted, panicking at the thought of having to go as Mr. Fisalis’ replacement and waving my hands frantically. I very much wanted to convey how much my entire being rejected his suggestion.

“...I thought you might say that, so I suppose the former duke and duchess may attend instead,” he continued after a pause, with a smile.

“...Why didn’t you just say that from the start...” *You did that on purpose, Rohtas! That was premeditated!*

He ignored my bitter glare back at him, his beautiful smile never faltering.

“The rally is meant to be a get-together for the soldiers about to be deployed. The platoon commanders will be participating too, so there will be a great many people there. The women’s corp will be in attendance as well.”

“I see.” *So it’s like a party?* I stared off into space, recalling how poorly I performed at social events. *But, still, it’s a wife’s duty to advance her husband’s social status while he’s away—there’s no point in trying to change something that can’t be changed (according to my mother-in-law). I can’t refuse to go. I need to just suck it up.*

Rohtas smiled a little stiffly as I thought it over.

“If it is any comfort, the former duchess and your own mother will be in attendance, too,” he encouraged me.

I didn’t have to go to the deployment ceremony, but if I chose to, I would have to be at the palace before noon. And moreover, since it would be a party, I would have to be dressed to the nines.

“Mimosa, do I have a dress I could wear to the party today?” If anyone had

memorized the contents of my dressing room, it was her.

“...Hmmm... I believe so. Bright colors would be best for a garden party. And for jewelry... The ruby necklace and earrings gifted to you by the former duchess are ready. What do you say to those?” she answered without hesitation—almost as if she was picturing the inside of my dressing room, based on how she would pause every so often as she spoke.

Something about her mood was a little off. Or rather... she wasn't acting like her usual self. Normally, Mimosa could rattle off the contents of every square inch of my dressing room, ready for anything the day could throw at me fashion-wise. It wasn't like her to be confused or falter. Even more than that, though, her whole expression would usually change at the mention of jewelry. I didn't keep my accessories on as strict of a rotation as my regular clothes, after all! When I took a hard look at her, her color did not look good either.

“Is something wrong, Mimosa?” Her color was fine yesterday. She handled my in-laws’ sudden appearance just fine, too.

“No, not at all, Madam,” Mimosa replied with a dim smile that certainly did not suggest that everything was okay.

“Madam is right. You seem somewhat different today,” Dahlia spoke up in a worried tone, also looking at Mimosa.

“See? Something isn't right. Are you tired?” Have I been working her too hard lately? Oh no, I'd feel absolutely terrible if that was the reason. I'm sorry, Mimosaaaa!

When I moved to get a better look at her face, her eyes began to dart around the room in embarrassment.

“No, it's not that... Oh! But don't come any closer, Madam, lest you catch it!” she answered in confusion, suddenly realizing that she might be ill and drawing away from me.

“I won't. Have you been feeling sick since this morning?”

“Yes. But I felt only a tiny bit feverish and a little sluggish, so I thought I would be fine so I got ready for work... I'm terribly sorry. It was foolish of me.”

I noticed Dahlia's gaze harden ever so slightly as Mimosa hung her head in shame.

"It's no problem! I'm pretty resilient against illness. Expect stomach problems," I quickly tried to reassure her. *I'm not one to lie in bed all day! ...Eek, I mean, I don't get colds very easily. 'Early to bed, early to rise, and always make sure to exercise' is my motto, and that keeps me plenty healthy!*

"Pardon me?"

"Oh, nothing, just talking to myself."

"A-Alright. It's inconsiderate of you to show up for work while sick. I'll speak to you later, Mimosa, but for now, go back to your room," Dahlia said sternly, although with a familiar pat on Mimosa's shoulder.

"Dahlia's right. You shouldn't push yourself if you're not feeling well. Go rest. Rohtas," Rohtas took a step nearer from where he had been quietly watching. "Let Bellis know what's going on."

"As you wish, Madam," Rohtas said with a bow before exiting the dining room.

"Okay then, girls," I said to the maids who had been standing by after they had served me my breakfast. "Would you make sure Mimosa gets to her room okay?"

"Yes, Madam."

Not that she can't walk there herself, but I just wouldn't want her to fall if she got lightheaded!

And so Mimosa retired to her room on the third floor under the watchful eyes of the other maids.

"I hope she'll be okay," I said to Dahlia as we watched the door to the dining room close.

"I'll call for the family physician later. In the meantime, we must get you ready for your trip to the—"

Just then, I realized something crucial.

“AHHHHH” I yelled hysterically, both hands to my face.

“Madam?” Dahlia asked, startled at my sudden outburst, her eyes wide.

“If Mimosa’s gone, who’s going to do my makeup?!”

I can’t show up at the Royal Palace of all places bare-faced!

15 — I Managed to Get Ready and Nothing Went Wrong Back in my room, for the time being, I was once again near panic.

“What should I do? I can’t go out in public without Mimosa, so maybe I can just stay home?” I thought out loud, trying a more optimistic angle.

“No, that is not an option. There’s no point in worrying. It’s time to face the facts.” Dahlia viciously shot down my desperate attempt at escape.

“Yeahhh, I figured.” I admitted defeat. *Dang it.*

I sat down at my vanity with a pout on my face, still unsure of the solution. Er, actually... I suppose saying I was unsure is kind of misleading.

If it was just a matter of some basic makeup, I could apply powder and blush just fine myself, but if I went out to a high society event looking like that, I could only imagine the reactions.

“Who is *that*?”

“We’re letting those sorts of people in?”

“Duchess Fisalis? Surely, not. No, you don’t say? Dear me, what a plain-looking thing she is. Ah ho ho ho!”

Images of beautiful women snickering behind lacy fans flashed behind my eyelids.

I’d be the family pariah if I did something like that.

All of the compliments I’d ever received were made possible only through Mimosa’s stunning formal makeup and unparalleled sense of style! But I didn’t have the time to stand around indecisively forever.

I reluctantly picked up my brush and began to comb out the same strawberry blonde locks Mimosa complimented every day. She always took her time to make sure my hair came out smooth and shiny. *Oh, Mimosa, thank you! I never realized how much you meant to me until you were gone (er, until you had the day off)!*

From deep inside my mind where I had let myself begin to drown in irrational sentimentality, I heard a light *knock knock knock* on my bedroom door.

Could that be Rohtas coming to tell me it's time to go already? Or Lady Fisalis descending upon me in a rage, unable to wait for me anymore?

Regardless of which it was, neither could be ignored, so I gave Dahlia a quick, nervous look, but she only smiled, as if to say 'don't worry,' and opened the door.

Revealing...

"Time to get ready, Madam!"

The ever-bright Spa Squad.

No sooner had they sashayed in than I was met with a perfect line of smiling faces and thumbs up. They really were smiling almost *too* much.

Wait... what's with those looks... you're all about to mob me, aren't you?! I shrieked internally as I tried to back away.

"We haven't the time to give you a full rub down today, so we're giving you an express treatment!"

"Right this way, Madam! Let's start by getting you into the bathtub lickety split!"

"I'll prepare your dress and accessories in the meantime!"

"We've got you covered! Mimosa told us everything we needed to do! Everything will be just fine as long as you do as we say!"

The walk to the bathroom felt more like a walk into a BDSM dungeon. I was so overwhelmed, I was completely at their mercy. Two maids stayed behind, one of whom I assume infiltrated my dressing room and identified her target. The other took her position by my vanity, wielding my brush excitedly.

I guess this isn't too different from my usual spa and makeup routine. I'm better off leaving it to them instead of doing it myself, and I can relax knowing that they're doing as Mimosa instructed them. I'm in good hands, then!

My dress and jewelry had been laid out by the time I came back from my

short bath. We didn't have the time to order a custom dress, for better or for worse, so I was going to wear something picked out from my closet.

"Mimosa's last request was that you wear something bright, so that's what we shall do!"

"She's not *dying*! You can't call it that when the person's still alive!" I corrected my airheaded maid as I looked over what she had brought out. It was a bright orange with lovely white flowers of various sizes decorating the bodice. The neckline was fairly low, but with the addition of the flowers, it would conceal my flat chest quite nicely. Operation breast deception was a go. I was very impressed with Mimosa's choice; she clearly knew my closet like the back of her hand.

Next to the dress was the box containing the custom-made pigeon blood ruby necklace and earrings from my in-laws. No matter how many times I saw them, their price tag alone made me tremble. *I still can't help but think they're wasted on someone as common as me. But if wearing them will make my in-laws happy, I can do it for them. I mean, there's the possibility that I'll faint if I focus on the price too much, but that's a risk I'll have to take.*

Anyway.

I got dressed quickly with the help of the maids who had prepared my outfit. I was then handed over to the maid waiting by my vanity. I would be getting my makeup done by a professional today, after all!

Since it was to be a formal event, my usual no-makeup look would have to be upgraded. In other words, a complete transformation was in order. It was a little— No, it was pretty depressing, honestly, to be rendered so powerless.

I sat still and quiet on the vanity stool, having accepted my fate to be painted like some art project, but the maid finished after what felt like just the first coat. She stopped after just some eyeshadow and lipstick.

"Alright, Madam! Your makeup is done!" It seemed as if she had only just begun.

My face was done up much more lightly than I had expected. *She was almost a 'rush-job' level of fast! Am I even fit to leave the house?!* I had some concerns,

given how disappointingly fast she had finished.

“Er, you finished very quickly! And I don’t seem to have that much on. Am I really good to go out like this?” I asked the maid.

“Why of course! There wasn’t much that I needed to conceal to start with! I only did exactly as Mimosa instructed. I’m super jealous! You look perfect!” she replied, whipping out a piece of paper upon which was written detailed instructions. *Is... Is that a diagram she included, too?*

“I wrote down exactly what Mimosa told me.”

“I see,” I said, looking the paper over. “It looks like she didn’t leave anything out.” *This goes beyond ‘detailed’ and into ‘obsessive’ territory*, I thought to myself, slightly unsettled. Also included in the instructions, in big block letters, was ‘FOUNDATION IS NOT A MASK! MAKE USE OF WHAT’S ALREADY THERE!’

“If ‘what’s already there’ means ‘my face,’ then shouldn’t I have a lot more makeup on?” I mumbled absentmindedly.

“No, Madam, we can go with light makeup precisely *because* it’s your face!” the maid corrected me.

Well, that’s just not adding up, then. Oh, she must mean I look fine now after the Spa Squad and Mimosa worked their butts off to clean me up. Yeah, that must be it! They’re all so humble, they just didn’t want to sound condescending! I get it now.

With makeup out of the way, it was time for my hair. I was passed over to another maid, her own smile reflected back in the mirror, like a baton between two sprinters.

“We’re going with a half-up, half-down look for today. I’ll add some volume to the top to give it a little more flair, and then use fresh flowers to accessorize. Does that sound good?” The maid sounded like she was having even more fun than Mimosa usually did.

“Fresh flowers?”

“Yes! Some that you planted in your garden the other day! Mimosa was quite pleased with how beautifully they bloomed, so she had Bellis bring some in.”

When I looked in the mirror, what did I see but the very flowers Mr. Fisalis had bought for me! Of the three colors that I had planted, the red and white ones had been chosen because they matched my ensemble the best, then cut out from a bouquet while their stems were still submerged, and were now laid out in neat rows on a tray.

Cutting them with their stems still in water will keep them from wilting over the course of the party. That was smart thinking on Bellis' part. He's really in a class all his own! He definitely pays closer attention to detail than me... He's got me beat there, for sure, so I won't focus on it too much.

"They'll look really cute in my hair!"

"They certainly will! Let's start getting your hair up now. I might not be as good as Mimosa, but you can still count on me!" the maid said, as she began to fiddle with my hair.

A short while later: My hair was done, complete with floral trimmings, and my transformation into Duchess Fisalis was complete!

"Eeee! You look amazing, Madam!"

"You really do! You're the pride of the manor!"

"It's such a shame Master can't see you now!"

"Walk free into the world, and let everyone witness your beauty!"

"Heh heh heh. I bet Mimosa would pay an arm and a leg to be here."

The maids were raining compliments on me, but I was still a little bit worried because my hair and makeup did not appear all that different from my usual look.

"Um. Am I all set to go out in public, then?" I asked timidly.

"Oh ho ho, Madam. Please, take a look in the mirror." This wasn't one of the maids patting herself on the back, oh no, this was Dahlia as she led me over to the full length mirror.

Looking back at me in the mirror was... me.

Since it wasn't an evening ball I was going to, it seemed Mimosa and the Spa

Squad had gone with a “bright and fresh-faced young wife who likes to go outside” look.

I looked vibrant in the orange dress. I felt... nice.

16 — Good News Mimosa was sick in bed, but thanks to the latent talents of her Spa Squad, I was able to transform into an elegant duchess. I would be able to go to the party, after all.

“Whoaaa! They made me look like... me!” I exclaimed, looking at myself in the mirror in awe.

“It’s not all that different from how you normally look, is it? But this is you at your most ‘you,’” Dahlia said with a smile—but it had to have just been flattery, right?

Anyhow, I was ready to go out!

“Since we have some time, I think I’ll stop to see Mimosa and show her how I look before I go. Would that be alright?” I asked Dahlia, hoping that being able to see the fruit of her detailed notes might make Mimosa feel better.

“That should be fine,” she agreed. “We still do have a bit of time to spare... Oh, Madam.”

“Yes?”

“About Mimosa...”

“Did the physician come to see her?”

“Yes. He came while you were getting ready. He suggested that it might be morning sickness.”

“M-Morning sickness?! Really?” *That means...* “Mimosa is pregnant?! Ohmygosh ohmygosh!” *Ahem. I really ought to have controlled my emotions better.*

“Indeed,” Dahlia replied, unfazed by my flailing. *Her face softened, though! I saw it! She’s happy, too!*

“I’m so happy! We should do something to celebrate! If only I didn’t have to go to the party, I could do something special with everyone here!”

“You are going to the party!”

“Darn it. It was worth a shot,” I pouted.

“We will have to have a little discussion, later...” she finally said with a stern smile.

According to Dahlia, there would be many more days when Mimosa wouldn’t feel well, and she wouldn’t be able to attend to me consistently. Normally, a woman would rest at her parents’ home. But Mimosa’s parents were commoners who ran a tailoring business, and since their business was doing quite well, they would likely be busy running the shop, and Mimosa wouldn’t be able to rest.

“If she can’t rest at her parents’ house, can’t she just stay here at the estate? She has a place to sleep, she gets three meals everyday, and she can distract herself with appropriate work, depending on how she’s feeling. And should she take a turn for the worst, she won’t have to worry because we have a physician on call.”

“Thank you for your understanding, Madam. Mimosa will be grateful to hear that you said she may stay.” Dahlia breathed a sigh of relief. I guess she had been worried about Mimosa, too.

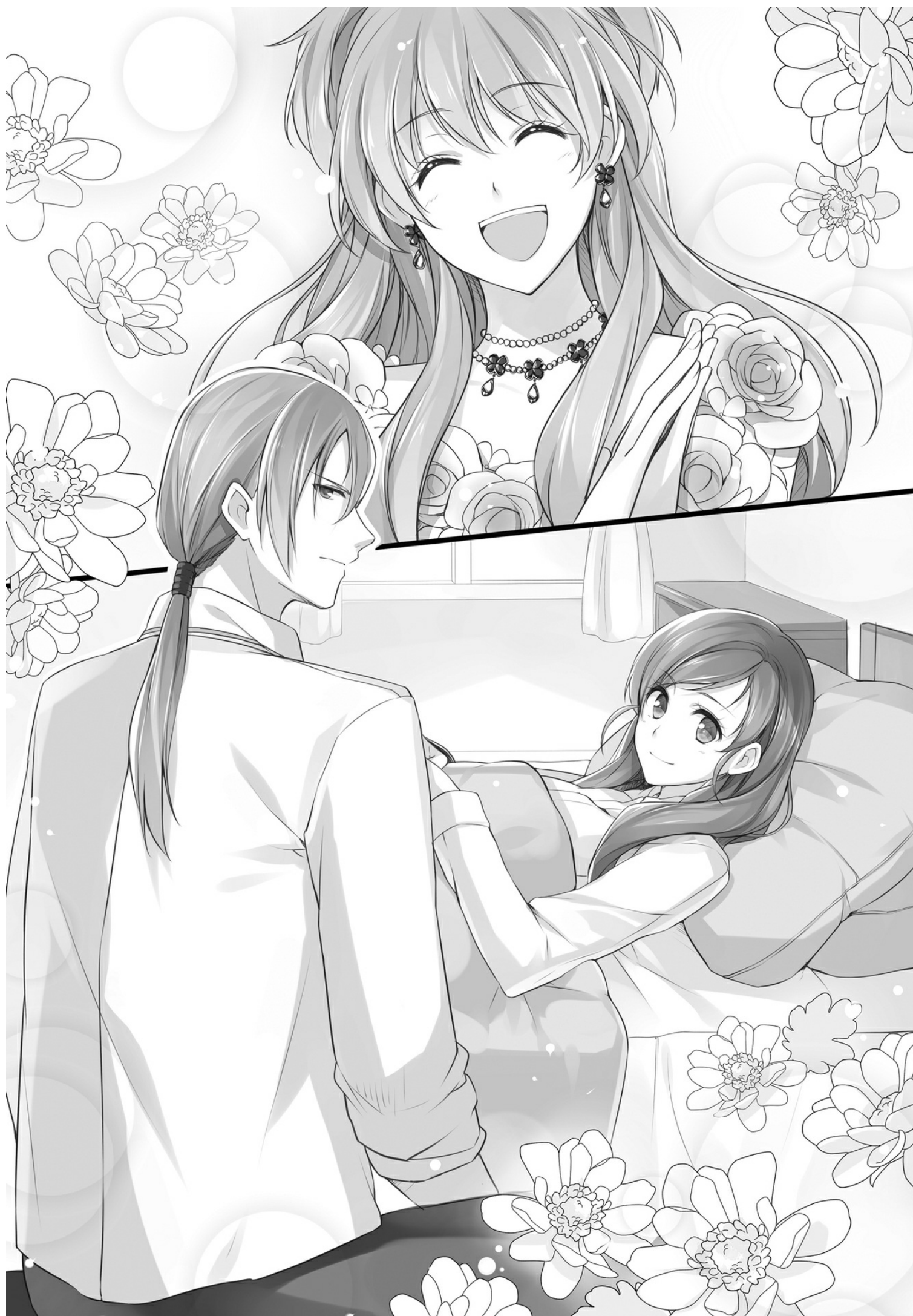
“We can check on her when we go to show her your dress and hair.”

“Sure!”

And so the two of us headed up to Mimosa’s room on the third floor, where all the servants stayed. When we knocked on the door to the room she shared with Bellis, Bellis’ voice answered.

He opened the door quietly to reveal Mimosa lying in bed. Bellis perched himself on an almost comically small chair next to the bed. He looked less like a concerned husband and more like a bodyguard. Like if someone so much as looked at Mimosa the wrong way, he would rain icy hellfire down on them. *Er, okay, maybe I’m overthinking it.*

“How are you feeling, Mimosa?” I asked, poking my head through the door.



“Oh! Goodness!” I must have startled her. “You didn’t need to come all the way up here, Madam.” She tried to sit up, but Bellis quickly stopped her.

“Sorry for surprising you. You don’t have to get up; I’ll come over to you. I came to show you how my look turned out. So, what do you think?” I did a little whirl to show her the full extent of my transformation.

“You look absolutely stunning! Nnnrgh, I wish I could have done it myself!” Mimosa replied, eyes sparkling as she bit the corner of her quilt in frustration. *I knew she’d like it!* I felt my face turn warm seeing her like that while knowing what Dahlia had told me.

“So, do you think I’m set to go to the party?”

“But of course! You’ll be the prettiest one there!” *All right, I got her seal of approval.*

“It’s a shame you couldn’t help me this time, but I’m excited for you to be able to for the next party. So, um, I hope your morning sickness goes away quickly!”

“M-Madam...” Now it was Mimosa’s turn to blush. It must have been a little hard on her to have cycled through so many emotions in the short time I had been in her room.

“Oh ho ho, I heard all about it, Mimosa! Congrats! On that topic, personally, I’d like you to stay here with me, but what is it that you want to do? Would you like to go to your parents’ house?” I asked her, thinking back to what Dahlia had said.

“I’d like to stay here, too, but...” her mood suddenly turned gloomy, and she looked down at her hands as they tightly gripped her quilt. *She’s really not feeling talkative today, huh?*

“Well, then I’d like you to stay. Even if you’re just as my companion. That way you wouldn’t overexert yourself.”

“You really mean it?!” Mimosa sat up, her face aglow with joy.

...And at the very same moment, I felt an icy cold stare shoot through me. When I nervously turned to the source of said dagger-like stare, I swear I saw

blue flames flickering in Bellis' eyes and felt an aura like a blizzard billowing off of him and his little chair. *Oh, jeez, there I was, making her overexert herself.*

"Of-Of course!" I assured her, as the arctic chill seemed to seep through my clothes and into my very bones. "And, uh, I can always ask another maid to be my gardening buddy! And another to do my hair and makeup when I need it done in a rush! You won't have to lift a finger, I promise! Ah ha ha ha!" *Oh, gosh, I hope he doesn't need any more convincing.*

"That sounds reasonable," Bellis said, his voice a low grumble.

"Er, well, we can talk about it more when I get back. I have to get going now, off to the Royal Palace..."

"Try to have a good time, Madam! I know you'll be fine! I'll be waiting!"

After we all said our goodbyes, I saw myself down to the entryway, ready to go to the Royal Palace.

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 4, Cercis' Perspective— Cercis' Dream Romance ◆ ◆ ◆

"Welcome home!"

Viola is there to greet me as soon as I return from work. Her gentle smile makes my stress and exhaustion melt away. That alone causes me to blush, but... I need more.

I reach out to her, longing for her touch, and pull her into a tender embrace.

"Cercis?" She looks up at me in a daze from where I have her trapped in my arms.

That's cheating, looking at me with those eyes.

I let reason override my desire to simply scoop her up into my arms. I permit myself to merely bury my face in her hair, the fresh scent of soap teasing my nose. There's no harsh or artificial smell to her at all.

Just her usual soap, sweet cakes or candy, and flowers.

She smells like sunlight.

I can tell how she spent her day by her scent. That, too, makes me sigh.

Ohh, my dear Viola...

"....so what do I need to do to make her love me like this, Corydalis?"

"What do you think you are, a poet or something? You sound like a lovesick teenage girl. Freak. Don't tell me you don't let your own *wife* call you by your first name."

"Just shut up."

I was trying to have a serious conversation with Corydalis, but all he did was glare at me, and I could not for the life of me figure out why.

Anyway.

It was absurd that I was so far from the one I loved. But as soon as I could return home to Viola, I swore...

“...Ahem. For now, anyway, I fear I have reached my limit for how long I can remain away from you. Therefore, I am doing my utmost to end my part in this war as quickly and decisively as possible.”

“There we go, now you’re in gear! Hmm, well, the first half didn’t really grab me, but I approve of the second half.” Corydalis was still glaring at me, but at least now I had his approval.

“To that end, I will have to take the enemy by surprise.”

“Well no kidding, pal. Oh, that reminds me, we just got some intel in earlier that the enemy has begun to set up camp in secret,” Corydalis commented as he looked over the report written by our subordinates scouting in the field. The enemy had constructed their base at the foot of a sheer cliff—natural fortification. It seemed they thought that was an easy way to protect against a rear attack.

Or, so you would think.

Oh, how naive they were.

I dare say we *predicted* that they would build their base there based on our investigation. Not to mention, considering they were boxed in and that the planning stage for our operation was already completed—with our attack, travel, and escape routes all decided—all we would need to do when we arrived was arrange the troops.

I informed Father of this in secret. Although it was a report, what was written in it was still subject to censorship, so I let him know via an old tradition: a delivery.

It is written in our history books that a married woman sent a tightly tied hemp sack of fruit as a gift to her younger brother who was off at war in order to notify him that a commander said to be loyal to their side was a double agent, and that the brother’s troop was to be besieged by the enemy—trapped like a rat in a bag, as the saying goes...

And because the woman had married into the traitor’s family, she sent the fruit without a letter in order to avoid suspicion. ‘You’re just like this fruit,’ was the message. When I used fruit from the southern regions, my own message

was clear, that it was the enemy nation in the sack.

Furthermore, the historical event I referenced was rather obscure, so I could be sure that only Father and Rohtas could interpret it correctly. That, and I tied the cords very, very tightly! I probably did not need to go that far, though. At any rate, by using this method, Father would have understood the situation on the front lines and would have been able to reassure Viola that everything was all right.

To return to my main point, however, we were going to raid the Aurantian stronghold.

“We’ll attack from the rear.”

“What?”

“We’d have the high ground from that position.”

Corydalis remained silent.

“The enemy will only be watching their front. Let’s look into routes leading into the rear.”

“Oh, by rear, you mean near that vertical cliff. You’re right, they won’t expect a rush from behind. You... you’re quite the fiend... So what was with all that mushy, girly talk a minute ago?!”

17 — Socializing for Beginners

My mother-in-law arrived at the entryway just seconds before I came downstairs after paying Mimosa and Bellis a visit in their room. It turned out that my father-in-law had attended the deployment ceremony in Mr. Fisalis's place, and had left a long time ago. Thank goodness. He said Lady Fisalis and I could follow him to the military rally.

Lady Fisalis gave me a gleaming white smile when she spotted me.

"Aaah, Vi! You look lovely! Oh, I'm so lucky to be able to walk there with a cute daughter-in-law! I wish I'd had a nice daughter like you, rather than that unsociable son of mine," she said excitedly.

Oh, no, I only look like this because of Mimosa and the maids' hard work! My true form is much, much different.

"Oh, thank you. Ha ha," I replied awkwardly, glad that she was pleased with my post-transformation look. *I mean, I'm not sure I'm that gush-worthy... Wait, don't think that way—this is no time to be pouting! I should tell her the good news about Mimosa! Wouldn't want to forget that.*

Collecting myself, I turned to my mother-in-law.

"I have some news for you, Mother Fisalis."

"Oh? What could that be?" she asked, her star sapphire blue eyes opening slightly wider in curiosity.

"Mimosa is pregnant."

"Mimosa? Pregnant?!" Her eyes widened even more, this time in surprise. I was impressed by how quickly her expression changed when I told her.

"Yes. She was unwell this morning, so I sent her back to her room and had the doctor come to see her. I only just found out myself.

"Ahh, that's wonderful to hear! Bellis must be very happy, too." She clasped her hands in delight.

"Yes, I think."

“You think?”

“He seemed really focused on her condition when I saw him, so I don’t think he was in a ‘happy’ state of mind quite yet.” *I wasn’t too surprised, after all—he doted on her they were children (and still does!). And right now, he seems mostly worried about her feeling unwell, but I’m sure his brain will catch up with what’s happened, and he’ll be overjoyed. It’ll dawn on him slowly once he calms down a bit.*

“Ah, I see. Now I understand,” my mother-in-law grinned as she nodded. It looked like she found that scenario quite easy to picture.

No sooner had she said so, however, than Rohtas politely cut short our conversation to say, “Pardon me, but seeing as we are pressed for time, would you mind continuing your conversation in the carriage?”

Oh, he’s right. We’ve gotta get to the Royal Palace! I nearly forgot. What do you mean that’s something I keep doing?

I followed Rohtas and Lady Fisalis out the door to where the carriage was waiting. We chose to sit across from each other inside, Lady Fisalis elegantly waving goodbye to the manor staff as they all performed their flawless ninety-degree bow and called out their goodbyes to us. My wave was a great deal less refined. *I just don’t think I’ll ever get used to them doing that when they see me off. Yeah, that day is never going to come.*

With Rohtas’ closing of the front door as its cue, the carriage departed for the palace.

The first thing my mother-in-law asked as the carriage rattled down the road was, “So how is Mimosa faring?”

“She seemed better when I went to see her just before I came down to leave. But Dahlia said that she might not always be feeling her best... She won’t be able to work for a while, but she wouldn’t be able to rest if she were to go home because her parents run a store and don’t have any helpers. So I was thinking that Mimosa and Bellis could stay here in the manor, in their room. What do you think? Maids who are off the clock would be able to check on her, and on days when she’s feeling up to it, I thought that a little bit of work might make for a nice distraction,” I explained, hoping she would give me some

advice.

“That sounds like a fine plan. Having maids who are close to her around will be convenient and give you some peace of mind,” she said, easily agreeing to Mimosa staying at the manor.

“That’s what I was thinking. I’ll enjoy having Mimosa nearby, too.”

“We Fisalises have always said ‘you should treat your servants like family,’ so I’ll let her know that she’s more than welcome to stay.”

What a noble thing to say! The manor really is a nice place to work, isn’t it? I mean, I sometimes hear rumors about it, but working at the manor sure seems like less work than working at the Royal Palace. I can see why so many of their employees stay if this is how warmly they’re treated. It’s no wonder they’ve got such a good workforce made up of the loveliest people.

Ah, but I’m getting off-topic.

“Oh, thank you!”

“Then again, considering my husband and I are retired, you could have made that decision all on your own, Vi... You don’t need to ask for my permission,” Lady Fisalis giggled.

“I wasn’t sure if it was alright for me to make decisions on my own without Mr. Fisalis here.” *I mean, it’s not my house.* I was too shy to say my thoughts out loud, though.

“But, Vi, dear, you’re a *duchess*. Have more confidence.”

I didn’t say anything back to her. I could only stare, a little aghast, but inside, I did reply. *You, my lady, are asking for the impossible. Thank goodness for brain-to-mouth filters!*

I still hadn’t fully escaped the mindset that I was just a “show wife.”

“I guess I’m not used to it yet...” I replied humbly, hoping that would satisfy her.

“Heehee, I am not surprised to hear that from you. You normally get lessons from Rohtas and Dahlia, do you not? They’re rather thorough with you?”

“Huh? Er, yes, very much so.” *On rainy days in particular. I can always expect a hard day’s work ahead when I wake up to rain.*

“I thought so. After all, you move so gracefully now, even when you’re doing mundane things. So have more confidence in yourself.”

“You really think so? Thank you.” *My mother-in-law complimented me! Surely being a long-recognized, socially-revered duchess plays a part in being confident. There’s no reason for her to feel like she needs to flatter me, either... Not that she’s the kind of person who would do that, anyway. So I think I can take her word for it.*

“You’re very attractive in terms of appearance, too, Vi. I really don’t understand why your self confidence is so low.”

“But... I’m just a plain Jane.” The moment the answer left my mouth, though, my mother-in-law laughed out loud.

“A plain Jane! Oh ho ho ho! You’re not plain at all! You’ll make an enemy of any lady you meet if you go around telling people *that!*”

“Oh, no, that’s the last thing I want to do. I already have enough enemies simply by being Mr. Fisalis’ wife.”

“What’s that? There you go again! Oh ho ho ho!” she replied as her body shook with laughter.

Did I say something weird?

“Even when you’re not dressed up, you always look so bright and fresh. Since you *are* dressed up today, you’ll be absolutely unrivaled.”

“But I only look this way because Mimosa and my maids cleaned me up.”

“Well, there wasn’t a lot for them to clean up in the first place!” Lady Fisalis pointed out, echoing what Mimosa had said earlier. “It doesn’t matter how hard one tries—if one hasn’t got the natural looks, that’s as far as they’ll get: ‘they tried.’ *You* have what it takes, though. Do you understand?” she pointed straight at me as she told me all this, clearly not about to take no for an answer.

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” The sheer power in her voice made my back straighten, and I answered like I was back in school.

“Good. Have more confidence, my dear, and you’ll have no enemies!”

“Alright!” I nodded earnestly, but couldn’t help but feel like I’d been tricked, somehow.

“Goodness, there’s no need to be so enthusiastic about it. At any rate, it is our job to advance our husbands’ careers through socializing.”

“That sounds hard.”

“Well, over time, you’ll learn how to do hard things. For now, though, I suppose listening to what people are saying and observing are the most important things.”

Even I could do that, introducing myself and then just listening to the conversation. And I already like people-watching!

“I see, I see.”

“When you’re listening to someone talk, are you able to tell what sort of person they are?”

“Kind of.” *I can tell if they’re arrogant or mean... stuff like that.*

“Even a tiny detail like that can prove useful to our husbands.”

“Oh, that’s right.” *Hmmm. I don’t have to be the one to start the conversation, then. Phew.*

“I guess you could call those my socializing tips for beginners,” my mother-in-law said with a giggle.

It might be more accurate to call them socializing tips for dummies, though.

18 — Off to the Royal Palace

As soon as my mother-in-law was finished giving me her socializing advice, the conversation returned to Mimosa.

“So, it sounds like Mimosa is having some bad morning sickness.”

“It seems so. We only just found out she is pregnant, though, and she wasn’t in poor health before.”

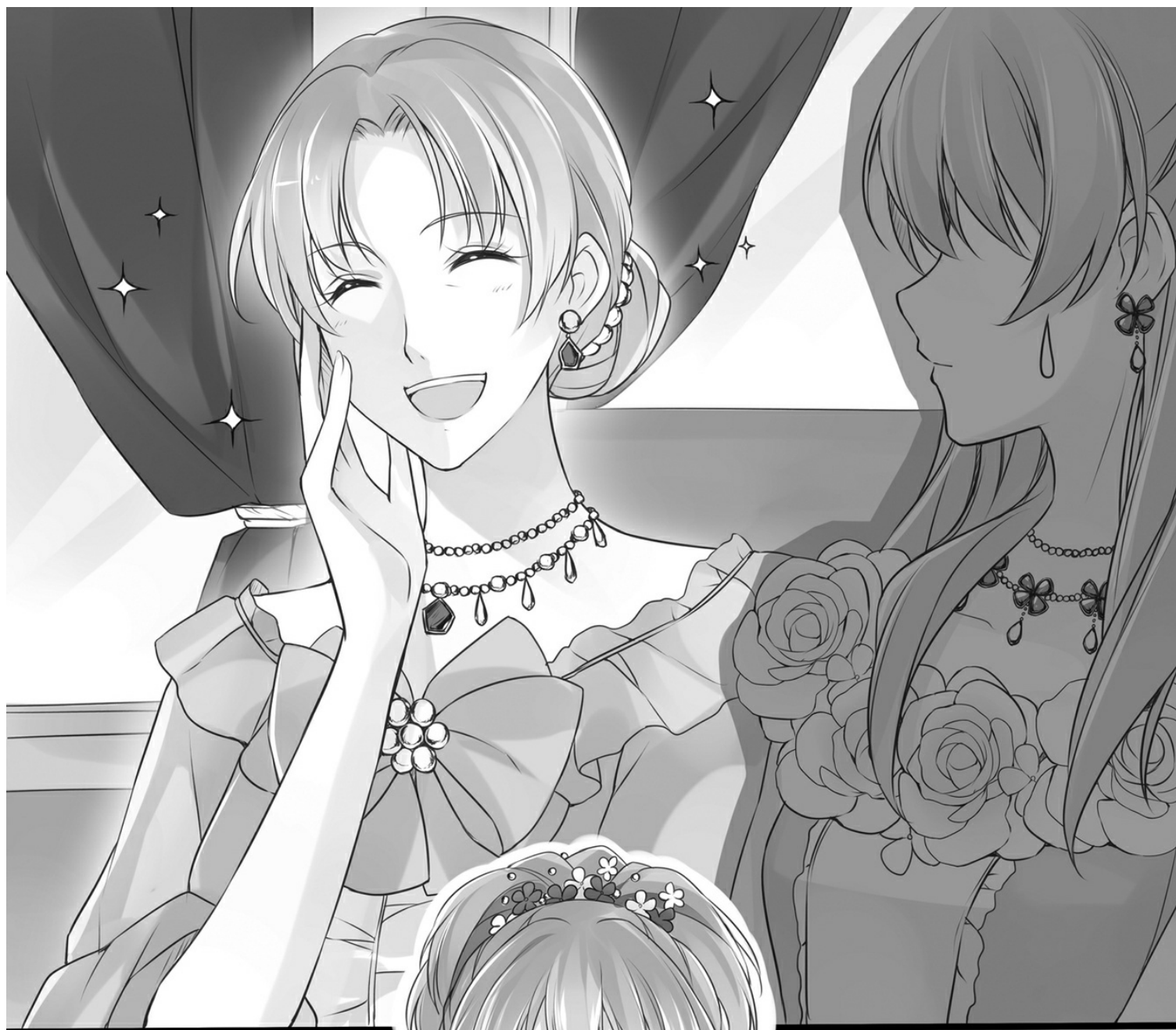
“Ah, it does happen like that sometimes. If you only just found out now, she’s probably at least two months along. There will be plenty of difficult days ahead,” Lady Fisalis explained. I nodded along as she bestowed upon me the wonders of the creation of life. *This is probably old hat to her at this point!*

“I bet there will be.” *Sorry, but there’s not much more I can say about that, considering I’ve never had children and don’t know anything about the process.*

“There certainly will. Nausea from simply smelling food, sudden bouts of dizziness...! Ahh, you’ll understand, too, someday, Vi!” she smiled so brightly I swear I could hear her teeth sparkle.

I couldn’t help but feel like the conversation had delved into a sensitive topic and that she was implying something. I mean, the way she looked at me certainly suggested she had certain... expectations. *Is this her way of asking for grandchildren?! Now that I think of it, where are we in terms of children in our agreement? When we renewed our contract, we essentially rewrote the whole thing, after all, so I guess we can’t go by the original anymore. Forget grandkids—I don’t even consider Mr. Fisalis and I to be a real married couple...*

When I timidly looked at my mother-in-law... Yup, she had a wide smile across her face. *Run! Run for the hills! Or at least pretend like you don’t understand what’s being implied!*



“Whatever do you mean? Ah ha ha ha!” I deployed a very fake laugh.

“Oh, that’s right... Dahlia stayed here, too, when she was pregnant,” Lady Fisalis said unexpectedly, which made me realize something else unexpected.

For a brief moment I was relieved that she didn’t continue to focus on me, but then I did a double-take; that was the first time I’d ever heard that about Dahlia.

“Huh? Dahlia did? She’s never mentioned it before, though.” *Not to mention, I had no idea she had children!*

“Indeed she did. She and Cartham have two children, a girl and a boy. They were born at the manor and raised there, too. Since both of their parents worked and lived at the manor, the place became something like their home, too. Their parents had help raising them, and it was better than them living at either family’s home while both of their parents worked. Now that I’m on the subject, Rohtas did make a good companion for them when he was young.” My mother-in-law continued to giggle at me in amusement as I digested what she had told me.

I had no clue! But then again, I didn’t even realize they were a couple at first. Dahlia has kept her private life very separate from her public life from the start, so it’s no wonder I didn’t know she had children. She’s made sure that all I know about her is that she’s married to Cartham!

“So they have children! I had no idea until now! And two children, at that!”

“Yes. Their daughter works at the Royal Palace, and I believe their son is training to be a chef, somewhere,” she told me after a moment of thought.

“Woahhh. What does their daughter do at the palace?”

“She is a lady-in-waiting to the queen. Truthfully, she had planned to work at the manor as soon as she finished vocational school, but then she was called to the palace. She probably figured that since Dahlia had once rejected an invitation to work at the Royal Palace herself before coming here, it would be needlessly cruel to reject them a second time. So for now, she is on temporary loan, you could say, to the palace, and she is working to further her career there.” Shocking new information seemed to pour from Lady Fisalis’ lips.

And is it just me, or is she kind of making the Royal Palace sound bad in comparison? Regardless, Dahlia's daughter sounds amazing! I bet her grades in school were amazing, too. The palace wouldn't have called on her personally if they weren't. This is the first I've heard of Dahlia refusing an invitation from the palace herself, too. That's incredible.

"So, anyway, Mimosa is more than welcome to stay at the manor, as well."

"She'll be thrilled, I'm sure, when I tell her." I'll have to tell her right away when I get home!

The Royal Palace came into view while we were chatting in the back of the carriage. This would mark the third time that I had been there. It should go without saying that the first time was my wedding, which had been over six months prior at that point. The second time was that 'add-on' party. *Wow, it's been so long. But then again, I don't have any reason to go to the palace myself... nor do I find myself actually wanting to go very often.*

Given that the day's event was to be a garden party, the carriage dropped us off at the gate to the garden. The garden at the Fisalis manor was gorgeous to be sure, but the Royal Palace's garden was truly befitting of, well, a palace. *Er, no... maybe ours is actually prettier,* I thought to myself, but I knew that to say so out loud would be an offense against the crown—even if I did really believe ours was better.

But enough with the flattery.

In terms of size, the palace's garden was obviously bigger. And in that expansive garden were crowds of women dressed in multicolored dresses, but they all paled in comparison to the Women's Corp who had come out in full regalia.

It was easy to tell who was in the military, as they were all wearing knight's or soldier's uniforms. They were the most important people there that day. Apparently, you could tell their rank by their lapel pins. I say "apparently"... because I sure couldn't. I was never good at remembering that sort of thing.

Nevertheless, there was a huuuge crowd out that day. The weather was on our side, too, with not a cloud to be seen—perfect weather for a garden party. The mood of the gathering was nice, too—less 'off to war, men!' and more

simply pleasant.

So this is a military rally...? It's awfully calm, isn't it? Just a regular garden party.

No sooner had Lady Fisalis and I alighted from the carriage and entered the gate to the garden than: "My, if it isn't Duchess Fisalis!"

"How wonderful to see you again!"

"How long has it been since you moved to the countryside?"

"Oh, my mistake, you're the *former* duchess, yes? Your son's wife is such a lovely girl." In a split second, my mother-in-law was surrounded by (I assumed) old friends.

"My word, it has been a while since I've seen everyone. Are you well? Yes, the current duchess is Viola here. I suppose that makes me the 'ex-duchess,' oh ho ho." The open and friendly attitude Lady Fisalis had shown me inside the carriage disappeared, and she transformed into the elegant and refined Former Duchess Fisalis. *It was like flipping a switch!* She also made sure that everyone gathered around her understood that I was the current duchess, not her, but she was smiling all the while.

She did not seem startled by the swarm of ladies who rushed at her, and I couldn't help but be impressed at how she calmly greeted each of them. *Her energy's completely different now. This must be what "advanced" socializing looks like! Complete with a bonus real world example, mother-in-law included! I'd better watch and learn.*

I positioned myself just behind Lady Fisalis and watched respectfully.

"Since it's been so long, why don't we all chat over there?" someone in the group of women suggested, at which point Lady Fisalis was swept away by the crowd, leaving me all alone before I could even comprehend what happened.

La—?! Lady Fisalis?! What am I supposed to do now?!

I looked around but didn't see anyone I knew. I could not even look for Lady Fisalis; I had lost sight of her in the thick crowd. My parents were supposed to be there, too, but after I looked around for them to no avail, I assumed they

had not arrived yet. I was hoping to catch sight of Miss Iris and my other friends, whom I had also heard were attending, but I could not find them, either.

So much for that. It looks like the time has come to deploy my most powerful secret skill, cultivated through years of practice: Secret Ritual: Hidden Wallflower!

Oh, wait. This is a garden. There are no walls.

19 — Once a Wallflower, Now a Rose Among Daisies Dun dun DUN!

My happy place, my promised land—WALLS are nowhere to be seen!

Please forgive me for bringing down this sun-drenched, laughter-filled scene. I'm just processing my shock.

Fortunately, I snapped back to reality when the other guests filing by started to glance my way.

Oh no, I'm probably weirding people out standing here frozen in terror by the gate! This is not the way Mimosa wanted me to stand out! And I want to avoid standing out in any fashion at all costs!

Taking the drink I was offered as I entered the venue proper, I scolded myself for getting in the way earlier, and walked over to the area where the party was being held.

Parasols dotted the crowd under the warm midday sun, and chairs had been provided at tables. It looked like a good spot for chatting, snacking, and also taking a break from chatting and snacking. Not that standing and talking was out of the question, of course.

There was also live music provided by an orchestra, and people who felt so inclined were dancing.

There were a great many bigwigs from all over the kingdom—especially high-ranking knights and soldiers—mixed in among the guests, but the garden was big enough that it did not feel cramped. Everyone was scattered about in different spots in groups of two or three.

There were food and drinks set out next to the garden entrance near the palace, where you could pick whatever you wanted. You could also ask one of the servants floating around to bring you something, but I still wasn't used to the idea of doing that, so I went and helped myself.

Oh, wait, I should watch how much I'm eating today, huh. Wouldn't want a stomach emergency in a place like this, I thought to myself. I nonchalantly

scanned the crowds for my parents, but it looked like they still weren't there.
You were the one always telling me not to be late, Father!

But now that my last ray of hope, my mother-in-law, had been abducted by that mob of noblewomen, I had to find somewhere to hide myself away. I listened to her advice about socializing, but there was no way I could make small talk with anyone there by myself when I didn't know anyone, much less if someone asked me to dance! *I'm just not cut out for this.*

...No, no, no. Stop thinking like that. Just relax. No one expects you to do that. The important part is that you're here. You already fulfilled your obligation to show up.

Okay, now that you've calmed down, look for a place to hide!

Yes, I'll set up camp at the table farthest from the center of the crowd and let myself vanish into thin air.

So with that goal in mind, I set out to find a seat. Unfortunately, all of the seats had already been taken by elderly people deep in conversation with each other. I wasn't so determined to disappear that I'd hassle an elder out of their seat—after all, it was common courtesy for people my age to *give up* their seats to older people. Thus, Operation Table Takeover came to a sudden end.

I walked around the venue, drink in hand, as I searched for some cover I could use in place of a wall. *Just how many people are here that I don't recognize a single one of them even after all this searching? There's too many, look harder! ...Yeesh, now I'm mad at myself.*

Meanwhile:

Multiple ladies and gentlemen who recognized me from the previous three parties I had attended said hello to me, but I, tragically, did not recognize a single one of them. Please forgive me.

"How good to see you again, Duchess Fisalis!"

"You look as beautiful as always. May I ask you to dance with me to the next song?"

I gave these lovely people the best replies I could manage—that is to say,

lukewarm ones—as I wandered the party venue. Then, I spotted Miss Iris and some other ladies a ways away.

Finally, someone I know, said a voice in my head, but...

“Which unit might you belong to?”

“Oh, I belong to ○○ unit.”

“Ah, so then you’re to depart for the battlefield. I wish you well.”

“Thank you, it’s an honor to have a lovely lady like you worry about me.”

Just my luck. Upon closer inspection, Miss Iris and the other ladies had been approached by a handsome knight. *She’s very forward, that Miss Iris! I see she’s just as outgoing today as ever!*

The three ladies with her were talking to other people as well, and it seems like they were having a good time. So naturally, I gave up on going over to say hi to them. *I know how to read a room, at least! ...Usually.* Besides, it felt kind of nice to just watch them in secret for a little while.

Keep up the good work and you’ll be a lovely wife in no time, Miss Iris. Er, that sounds more like something I should be telling myself.

So, there were no empty seats, nor any walls. With nowhere else to turn, I made my way toward the edge of the venue. It looked like the best spot for people-watching, even though people-watching was not what I was supposed to be focusing on. For the time being, however, finding an inconspicuous place to stand was my top priority, so I stopped there for a moment and looked around.

“There you are, you pretty young thing. You had me quite confused back there when you suddenly disappeared, my beautiful little fairy.”

Whoawhoawhoa! What—What’s going on?! Whoever’s saying that is even sappier than Mr. Fisalis, I gagged when I heard the sweet nothings come from directly behind me. The voice sounded like it belonged to a man, low and sultry. *I could understand if it was an evening party, maybe, but... what is he thinking, using his bedroom voice like that in broad daylight?!* Oh, sorry, I just felt a chill run down my back.

Whatever it was that was unfolding behind me sounded like a young man laughing seductively and an enthralled young woman. *For that reason, I think I'm going to inch away, absolutely not peeking over my shoulder... and then once there's some distance between me and them, get back to people-watching!*

Once I had crept far enough away that I couldn't hear them anymore—*Who does that in the middle of the day? Ew!*—I surveyed the crowd one more time. When I saw a new promising inconspicuous spot, I decided to make a break for it, but...

"Excuse me, Miss. There's something I'd like you to hear," said someone, just as they grabbed my upper arm.

Hold up. That's the gross whisperer, isn't it? What could he want with me? Does that mean that sickly-sweet smooth talk from a minute ago was aimed at me?!

"...I think you have me mistaken for someone else," I replied, cheek twitching as I tried to smile, running over what I'd just heard in my mind.

"No, I was talking to you. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss. I don't think I've seen you before." It was indeed a man, tall and slightly tanned, wearing a knight's uniform. His pearly white teeth sparkled when he smiled.

Who the heck is this guy? I wondered, shaken up yet again. *I can't keep letting this happen.* Dahlia would scold me for letting myself get bent out of shape all the time: 'a proper lady doesn't lose control of herself!' *Ugh, I don't want to be thinking about Dahlia now, too!*

Er, we're not talking about Dahlia now, though. We're talking about this guy.

I gave the shady knight a once-over, but was positive I'd never met him before. *Well, he did say this was his first time meeting me. It's no wonder: when it comes to my social life, I'm practically a ghost! I don't like going out, and since I have a statement in writing from Mr. Fisalis saying that I don't need to, I've been whiling away my days as his happy hermit bride, so of course this man hasn't seen me before.*

That wasn't something I would admit, though, so I said, "I don't come out to

these events very often..." and gave a vague little laugh. I gently brushed his hand off of my arm and tried to walk away, but apparently I had misread him, and he put his hand back. He was a persistent one. I pushed his hand harder.

"The same goes for me," he continued on smiling. "I'm just a knight, so I'm no good at parties like this, either."

Hey, no, don't you sneakily put your other hand over mine while I'm still trying to peel your first hand off of me! I glared at him reproachfully.

In terms of appearance, he was a handsome man with blond hair and blue eyes, tall and slim of build. But the way he talked—utterly vapid, insincere flattery—came off as unpleasant and coercive. Unfortunately for him, it engulfed his otherwise striking figure in a stinking miasma of disappointment.

Do you feel me clawing at your hand? Take a hint, buddy. Fortunately, he doesn't hold a candle to my good-looking but good-for-nothing husband. I guess there is some benefit to spending so much time with Mr. Fisalis.

Argh, that cursed man is too attractive for his own good. Whenever I meet a man now, not only do I inevitably compare him to Mr. Fisalis, but Mr. Fisalis always comes out on top! And Mr. Fisalis is more than just a pretty face. He's the kind of person who writes letters mushy enough to make even career inspectors squirm! Can you do that, mister? ...What? Yeah, I'm bragging about how terrible my husband is. What're you gonna do about it?

Okay. We're going to pretend you didn't read that.

The man's uniform was a different color than Mr. Fisalis', so I was sure he was in a different division. In contrast to Mr. Fisalis' navy blue uniform, this man's was mostly deep green. Not to mention that Mr. Fisalis' entire unit wasn't even in town. Plus, the people in his special division already knew me, so they wouldn't say something like 'it's a pleasure to meet you,' even if I didn't recognize them... and more importantly, they didn't call me 'miss.'

I could easily tell, based on his uniform and everything else that... er, no, that's presumptuous of me. I only really noticed that his uniform was a different color.

"Oh?" I replied vaguely. *You say you're no good at parties? I can't imagine wh*

— My train of thought was interrupted when another knight wearing a uniform the same color as his appeared out of nowhere next to him.

“Yowza, ●●! That’s a pretty little lady you got there!”

The smooth-talking knight scowled briefly at the other before schooling his features back to how they were before.

“I just met her. She was just so cute, I couldn’t stop myself from talking to her.”

“Ohhh. Yeah, we’d definitely remember a face like yours if we’d met you before, even just once. Haven’t seen you around. I’m ●●● from the First Company. I’m the □□□, and I do all the △△△. This fellow’s in the same company,” the second knight said, introducing himself.

“Uh huh.”

Seeing an opportunity, the smooth-talking knight introduced himself, too.

“My apologies for not introducing myself. I ××× for the same company he does. I am ○○○. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Uh huh.” *I didn’t ask.*

I wasn’t listening too hard to what they were saying, so most of it went in one ear and out the other and all I really caught was ‘First Company.’ It wasn’t my fault that I did not care to make their acquaintance. They said their names, too, but I didn’t catch those, either, focused as I was on wondering when they would let me go.

“Oh, hey! A cute girl!”

“Looks like you caught yourself a lovely little lady!”

One by one, more knights in the same uniform were gathering around us.

“You can call me ×××!”

“And I’m △△△!”

They each introduced themselves, but by that point, I was at my limit and just wanted them to disappear. Before I knew it, however, I was surrounded by men in deep green uniforms. They were all rather forward, too. *What I wouldn’t give*

to be surrounded by the lovely ladies in the Bombshell Trio right now.

Unable to blend into a wall or escape to the edges of the party, I had become a flash of orange in a sea of green.

Aaaaah! This must be what it feels like to be popular! ...I hate it! Mr. Fisalis always stepped in and saved me when I got ambushed, but now he's not here and I have nowhere to run. Whaddaya know, I thought of something else nice about him.

"Oh, speaking of which, we haven't asked the young lady her own name yet," the smooth-talking knight said, as though he only just now noticed. Putting his hand to his chest and elegantly bowing in the knight's salute (I had gotten used to seeing it after all the messages the lady knights delivered!), he asked, "Might I have the privilege of knowing your name?"

I wanna gag! His words are like a sticky bun caught in the back of my throat! He's actually giving me heartburn! His words had the opposite of their intended effect on me; rather than swoon, any passion in my body turned to ice.

I don't want to give this sorry excuse for a man my name! I screamed in my head. But alas, I didn't get the sense that they'd let me go without me telling them my name. Just when I feared I wasn't going to make it out alive, however: "There you are! I found you, Duchess Fisalis!"

My savior has arrived!

The wall of green around me parted like the Red Sea and on the other side I spotted the face of a man I recognized.

...Er, who are you again?

I knew I had seen him before, but couldn't remember his name. It was like my brain was in a fog.

"Consul Argenteia!" someone within the green wall shouted.

Ohhh, that's right! That's where I know him from! Way to go, Random Knight!

"Oh, you're Duke Argenteia's...!" I still couldn't remember exactly what his relationship was to the Argenteias, so I left my sentence unfinished in a way I hoped read more as surprise than forgetfulness. However, I was pretty sure he

was the second eldest son of the family. I had a vague memory of meeting him at the Argenteias' soiree.

It was Miss Verbena who had made the strongest impression, so all I could remember of her brothers, more or less, was that they were present that night, although I recalled that they spoke to Mr. Fisalis like they knew him well.

Oh, yes, I think he was a childhood friend of Mr. Fisalis, right? But of course I can't remember his name!

"The former duchess lost track of you and has been looking all over," Consul Argenteia said pushing the knights aside and cheerfully striding up to me.

"She has?" I asked, staring a little out of sheer relief at seeing a familiar face, as he ripped the smooth-talking knight's hand from my arm. Thank. God.

"...Duchess... Fisalis...?" Shock and fright were written across smooth-talker's face, as well as those of the knights beside him.

"Yes, that's me. I'm Cercis Tinensis Fisalis' wife," I asserted, a little embarrassedly, but glad that I managed to remember his full name. *I didn't want to tell them my own name, so I just used his instead. They should know who he is.*

"Don't tell me you didn't know who she was? This is the wife of Duke Fisalis, the commander of the Special Ops Division," the consul said, extricating me from my green dungeon and shooting the smooth-talker a cold glare.

"This is the first time I've met her, so..." he said as the color drained from his face.

"Oh, really? Ah, well, he, *the duke*, doesn't exactly force her into the limelight," the consul smiled meaningfully as the wall parted for him again.

He definitely intentionally emphasized 'duke' there even though I'm technically the one choosing to stay out of the spotlight. I really had no room to complain, though, so I didn't say that out loud.

I know I said it before but, Consul Argenteia wasn't exactly wrong: I rarely went out, and although Mr. Fisalis' coworkers had been at the few parties I had attended, those gatherings had been nowhere as big as this one. So there had

to have been some people at the rally who knew of the duchess (i.e. me), but wouldn't recognize her.

"Th-This girl... this lady is... the rumored Duchess Fisalis..."

"No way! This is the first time I've seen her up close."

"She's like everything you'd ever want in a wife!" they all whispered. *What's with everyone calling me a 'dream wife' or whatever? I wish they'd give up on that joke!*

The mere mention of the duke (complete with a knowing smirk on the consul's part) seemed to have an immediate effect—everyone, not just the smooth-talker, turned white as a sheet and said: "I-I'm very sorry, Madam!" before scattering like baby spiders.

They have good reason to. I'd be embarrassed, too, if I called someone a 'dream wife'!

20 — A Little Dissatisfied

“It’s good to see you again, Madam.”

“And you as well.”

“I’m terribly sorry about how my sister behaved last time.”

“Ah heh heh heh heh...”

“I never thought that Cercis would be this devoted to you, honestly.”

COUGHCOUGHCOUGH

I followed behind Consul Argenteia as he led me through the crowd toward where my mother-in-law was after he’d kindly freed me from the smooth-talking knight. Make no mistake—I was glad he had come to my rescue, but I could have done without his casual reminder of Mr. Fisalis’ obnoxious bragging episode at the Argenteias’ soiree. He didn’t need to look so wistful about it, either.

“Er... which way did my mother-in-law go again?” I asked him, deciding to change the subject as I was unable to bear rehashing more of my dark past. I looked this way and that for her as I trotted along behind the consul, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“She’s at a table reserved for nobles. When she saw you surrounded by those jerks, she sent me to help you.”

“And that you did! Thank you very much! Those men said they were knights, but their uniforms were a different color than Mr. Fisalis’ ...Is there some sort of meaning to the colors? You’ll have to forgive me, I’m quite ignorant when it comes to military matters,” I inquired, thinking back to what they had said as we headed over to the nobles’ seats.

“So the special division that Cercis is in wears mostly navy, the frontline troops wear deep green, and the Royal Guard is in burgundy,” he explained with a kind smile, without making fun of me for not knowing despite being married to a commander.

“Oh, I see. But isn’t the Special Ops Division a part of the frontline troops? They’re already on-site as an advance party, I mean,” I inquired further, a little worried that it was a silly question.

“Ah, you’re asking if they see actual combat? The special division goes in first to set things up, and then the frontline troops go to war following their instructions. You can think of the special ops as the brain—the ones giving directions—so that’s why they’re the first ones out there, but they don’t actually fight. Hence the different-colored uniforms.”

I get it now. So navy means you’re the brains and deep green means you’re the brawn. The Royal Guard are primarily in charge of guarding the palace and the royal family, so they wouldn’t go to the frontlines.

The consul’s explanation was much appreciated. *Mr. Fisalis never told me about all those things, so this was very insightful.*

“So that’s how it works. Thank you for explaining.”

“Not at all. Oh man, their faces when they found out who you were! They looked like frightened rabbits! I think they’ll find themselves of use down there,” Consul Argenteia said, his bright smile morphing into a smirk.

“Huh? You do?” *What could he mean by that? How weird that his smile turned dark all of a sudden, too.*

As we were talking, we made it to the nobles’ seating area where my mother-in-law was waiting for me. Yes, there were seats reserved just for nobles... They were at the highest point of the garden, overlooking the rest of the venue.

That explains it. Lady Fisalis must’ve seen those knights swarming me from up here. This must be where the term ‘high status’ comes from... No, wait. There’s nowhere to hide up here. This is exactly the opposite of what I was looking for! She called for me specifically to get me to sit up here, didn’t she?!

His Majesty the king was sitting smack dab in the middle, the queen at his side, and opposite them were the princes and princesses. The nobles’ seating started to the sides of the royal family, with the Fisalis family occupying the seats closest to them, since they were the highest ranking in the whole kingdom. I felt a little lightheaded when I spotted Lady Fisalis sitting right next

to the queen. *Seeing her that close to royalty—both physically and in terms of how intimate they are too, really leaves no room for doubt about how elite the Fisalises are.*

“Ahh, Vi! Over here!” Lady Fisalis motioned for me to come over, her radiant smile shining all the while, when she saw me. *I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t redirect everyone’s attention to me like that, but okay. Like, the queen. Who is sitting right there. I guess I’m obligated to come over now. I should have known you’d find me eventually.*

I was reluctant to join them, but in order to keep that from being glaringly obvious, I came out from behind the consul and said, “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Good day to you, Your Highness,” putting Dahlia’s etiquette training to good use.

“How do you do? You look lovely today, Duchess. I do believe you are becoming more beautiful every time I have the pleasure of seeing you,” replied the queen. Her feminine smile was very becoming of her glamorous image.

“Isn’t she just?” agreed my mother-in-law beside her. “She makes us all so proud!” she said with a look of satisfaction. *I don’t think you were supposed to take the queen at her word, Mother Fisalis.*

“You hate to see them grow up so fast, but were our own son a little older, maybe he could have a bride of his own!” the queen lamented as the prince cutely bit the corner of her handkerchief. *Your Highness, your son is five. It’s obvious you’re just flattering us. I’ll be a tacky middle-aged housewife by the time your son is grown up.*

...What am I getting worked up for? These are just pleasantries. Aristocrats are accomplished flatterers! I decided to observe the charade, of sorts, unfolding between my mother-in-law and the queen.

“That *is* unfortunate, tee hee hee. Viola is ours, though, and we’re not sharing! Oh, Vi, that’s right, I’m sorry for leaving you alone back there! You cannot be too careful around pests. Cercis will be furious when he finds out,” she said with a shrug, unamused.

“There’s no need for that, I’m perfectly fine. This garden is just so big, I got lost, is all. Thankfully the consul was able to help me out.”

“So you found Celosia to be of use, then?” she replied with a knowing chuckle. *Oh, that’s right! His name is Celosia! I won’t forget now!*

“Yes. He even showed me here. He was a big help!”

“Glad to hear it! Oh, that reminds me. Your parents are sitting over there.” My mother-in-law pointed to the seats for the lowest ranking aristocrats, right at the very edge of the tables: my much-desired wallflower’s paradise! *Figures my parents would be seated in the best spot at this whole party*, I thought as I looked their way, enviously. My parents just waved for me to come over. *I was going to come over either way!*

“Oh, yes, there they are. I’ll go say hello to them; it’ll just be a moment, Mother Fisalis. Please excuse me, Your Highness.” *I actually don’t plan on coming back here, but I’m sure you sensed that already.* I didn’t say that part out loud, of course.

I didn’t particularly get the impression that Lady Fisalis and the queen would mind if I stayed with my family, anyway, given that they were already good friends and back in conversation with each other. It would be a relief to not feel like the ugly duckling anymore next to those two high class women. I hightailed it to the table my parents were at.

I never would have imagined that my parents would be in reserved seating for nobles, even if they were the ones for the lowest ranking. *...Hmm, Father’s clothes look nicer than I remember. Did Mother own that dress before? Did I overlook them earlier because they were wearing nicer clothes than I expected?*

“Father, Mother, what are you doing here? I never would have thought to look for you in a place like this!” I’d just found them, and here I was already complaining.

“Someone led us here. We were just as surprised! Isn’t that right, dear?” said Mother. She looked more dignified than when I had last seen her, and was wearing a dress in a suitably dignified shade of dark burgundy.

“We were indeed! I guess we’re getting special treatment because you’re the bride of the Fisalis family head,” agreed Father, looking somewhat uneasy. Seeing him looking very classy there in a gray-blue suit coat made me wish he’d dress up more often.

“That must be it, otherwise impoverished nobles like us would never be invited to sit here.”

“Yep,” both of my parents agreed with me.

I was finally able to relax once I sat down with my parents. Even those seats had a good view of the grounds, too. They really were the best seats in the house, er, garden.

“Hmmm. You’d never guess there was a war going on, looking at this view,” I mumbled in a voice so soft that only my parents could hear as I looked out over the festivities. All I could see were people laughing and dancing, eating delicious food. The whole garden was an image of tranquility, drenched in warmth as the sunlight poured over it, accented by chirps and tweets from the little birds looking for crumbs.

...Mr. Fisalis and everyone in the special division is on the frontlines right now, though. Remembering that makes me... a little depressed, somehow.

“No, you never would. But then again, this rally is all to send a bunch of knights putting on their bravest faces off to fight, isn’t it?” Father said, trying to calm me when he sensed my gloom.

“Mr. Fisalis and his unit didn’t get a rally like this. They only had a secret ceremony, and then they had to leave in secret, too. It’s the same war, so I don’t see why they had to be treated differently,” I grumbled. *It wouldn’t have to be anything fancy—just so that they weren’t shuffled away in the dark! They’ve all been down there giving it their all for over a month. That’s a month more than all the people here! ...Heh, I’m probably being unreasonable. Arrogant, even.*

“There, there, Viola. Simmer down. A rally even grander than this awaits them when they come home. There’s no reason to be upset, see?” Father said with a concerned smile.

Huh? Another rally? That was the first time anyone had mentioned that to me, so I was a little perturbed that I hadn’t heard about that until then.

“...An even grander one?”

“Of course. The frontline troops owe everything to the advance parties’

efforts, after all. They've always had events for the advance parties afterward."

"You mean like prior to this war?" *Now that I think of it, I remember hearing somewhere that there's a 'repatriation ceremony' for when soldiers and knights come home from war and that the aristocracy is obligated to attend it. Which would mean that Father has been to one before, even though we're basically nobodies. That must be how he knows.*

"Exactly. Did you not know about that, Vi?"

I didn't say anything because *of course* I hadn't known, so I just stared at my shoes.

I mean, all the other times he left were just like business trips, so I didn't know there'd be some sort of ceremony like this. What was I supposed to do? Heck, I only learned about deployment ceremonies this morning! Even Mr. Fisalis never said a peep about these things. And there was even a war right before we got married, I angrily explained to absolutely no one but myself.

"...so you didn't know, then?"

Stop staring at me, Father!

The rally came to an uneventful end while I whiled away my time with my parents, and the next day, the frontline troops marched out of the capital to much fanfare.

The lady knights continued to deliver messages even after the deployment ceremony. Up until the frontline troops marched off to the front, I had been receiving letters from Mr. Fisalis at a laidback rate of one every three or four days, with each letter about three full pages long. After the troops left, however, the system changed; I began to receive not letters but oral reports every other day. No matter which knight relayed the information to me, she always said she felt like she was racing back and forth between the capital and the front lines. They were certainly very busy and working very hard.

Mr. Fisalis himself seemed to be completely unchanged.

"The commander was grazed by an arrow on the front lines the other day!" Alkanna, the lady knight with the bronze hair, reported to me that day over tea.

So it sounds like there was a brief brush with the enemy, then... but I thought that since Mr. Fisalis was part of the 'brain,' he wouldn't be involved in actual combat?

"Er, may I ask you something? I thought Mr. Fisalis was stationed in the war room, since he's part of intel. He's not actually going to fight, is he?" I asked her timidly.

"Uh, well, he's stationed there *for now*." Alkanna's smile turned strained as soon as the question left my mouth.

"What do you mean... 'for now'?" I asked with a tilt of my head, hoping she would clarify.

"Er, yes. So, Commander had been saying that he wanted us all to finish our work quickly so we could come home early... but then he rushed off to the front lines."

"Uh oh..."

Mr. Fisalis had foolheartedly decided to go on a one-man mission away from the war room. And then Corydalis and the others had followed. ...*Actually, that's not hard to imagine.*

"And it was that battle where his chest was grazed by an arrow..." Alkanna said, cutting her sentence short with a meaningful drop to her voice.

...What? What did you say? An arrow grazed his chest?!

"Um, but he's fine, right? He's not hurt, is he?!" *I couldn't possibly imagine someone as confident as Mr. Fisalis getting hurt, but Alkanna paused at a weird place, and it's just making me really worried! An injury on your chest would be very serious, right? Oh no, what if it knocked him off his horse?!*

Now extra nervous, I pressed Alkanna for even more details.

"Erm, it seems that he had been carrying a letter from you in his breast pocket, and that's what the arrow grazed. So his uniform was ripped, but the commander himself wasn't so much as scratched. He was livid that your letter was torn, and that anger is driving him now."

Oh. My. God. How could you put my letter in your breast pocket of all places,

Mr. Fisalis! And to go out there without a single piece of armor, wearing just your uniform coat! It doesn't sound like you take WAR very seriously! Aren't you supposed to be smart?!

I let out a sigh of relief and let my shoulders unclench when I learned he was alright, but I was pretty perturbed to hear what he'd been up to and embarrassed to hear he'd carried a letter of mine with him.

Just... Focus on the fact that he's not hurt. That's the most important thing... right?

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 5, Cercis' Perspective — On the Frontlines ◆ ◆ ◆

"Hmph!" I sneered, without really meaning to.

The letter that had just arrived was from my childhood friend Celosia, the second son of the Argenteia family. He was a consul—a high-ranking civil servant—at the Royal Palace.

The letter briefly described the military rally that had been held the previous day at the Royal Palace. He said that some guys from the First Cavalry Company had been unknowingly hitting on my wife.

She is, of course, undeniably adorable. At first glance, she seems sensitive and fragile, but her smile almost blossoms across her face, overflowing with tender care, her bearing elegant and fluid like water. She usually dresses in a way that enhances her natural light, and sometimes I am moved to speechlessness by her beauty.

Having said that, those men had no right to be speaking to her like that. *Don't you look at her! She's mine.* You couldn't help but run into other nobles at a military rally, but still, that sort of behavior is upsetting. And I can't help but be furious as well, knowing that Viola had been exposed to their coarseness.

Thankfully Celosia had also included the names of the men who'd harassed her. Atta boy, Celosia. I guess there was something to you memorizing the list of peerage for fun after all. You can count on a consul's memory.

So, the cavalry. And the First Company at that.

I was just wondering what I would do for frontline troops for the attack. I see. The First Cavalry Company, then. The scope won't be too broad, and the unit is more than capable.

Hmm.

I think I'll use them for this operation.

I felt myself being watched as I thought about the upcoming operation after

reading Celosia's letter. When I looked to see who it was, my lieutenant commander Corydalis was staring at me like he'd seen a ghost. *What're you looking at me like that for?*

"What do you want, Corydalis?"

"Nothing. It just looked like you were reading a nice letter, and I was curious."

Ah, so he thinks this is what I look like happy.

"I guess it is funny in its own way."

"In its own way?"

"You want to read it?"

"Am I allowed to?"

For god's sake, don't pretend like you don't.

"Yes. It's from Celosia. It's just about yesterday's rally at the Royal Palace."

"Celosia...? Oh, you mean Consul Argenteia. I didn't expect a report already about something that happened only yesterday."

"That's Celosia for you," I said, tossing Corydalis the letter. He skillfully caught it and examined the contents.

A dark grin spread across his face as his eyes tracked over the words. *Heh, I see you're pissed, too.*

"Heh hey... that *was* pretty funny. Those bastards. That's just bad form, flirting with someone who obviously isn't interested in you," Corydalis smiled.

"Of course it is. We'll have to work them to the bone here to retrain them from the ground up," I said firmly, a dark smile of my own slowly appearing on my face.

"Yikes, I don't wanna know what's got the commander and lieutenant commander smiling like that."

"Yeah, that's the look you get when you're thinking of something really wicked."

"I bet they came up with some absolutely brutal strategy for the attack."

“Something positively evil, even.”

“Gyaaaah! Reading it over is going to be a nightmare! Oh, what do you know, I think I feel a stomach ache coming on!”

“You what now?!”

The members of our unit stood around Corydalis and me, shaking in their boots as they watched us. They were whispering, but I still heard every word. Seeing this, Corydalis said, “Oi, you all aren’t going to let these guys get away with this, are you?”

“Absolutely not!” my unit replied in unison. *Glad to see my men practically revere Viola.*

“I thought you might say that. They’re on board, too, then,” Corydalis smirked as he looked back at me.

It was settled then. Seems we’d be using the First Company in this significant operation.

“Hm. That’s that, I suppose. Let’s have the First Company cover our front for our most important and difficult operation.”

“Yes, sir!” the division replied in a moment of unity.

“They’ll regret crossing me from the moment they arrive,” I murmured out loud, not entirely on purpose. *I won’t accept anything less than 150% from them. Viola’s made a new man out of me, it seems.*

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 6, Cercis' Perspective — The First Cavalry Company's Moment to Shine? ◆ ◆ ◆

Several days after the deployment ceremony: The First Cavalry Company was summoned to the tent currently being used as a command center. They would have had no idea what I had called them there for, but they obediently showed up nonetheless.

"I'll leave the specifics to you, Commander Fisalis."

"Yes, sir," I replied.

To start with, the head general who outranked me in the Chivalric Order went before the First Company. I watched from the shadows as I awaited my turn. I was next.

"You may have only just arrived, but you are receiving your orders now. We have decided that the First Cavalry Company will spearhead this attack. Do you have any objections?" the head general asked them solemnly.

"No, sir. It would be our honor!" the company commander immediately replied on behalf of the entire company before saluting.

Being the vanguard is a dangerous role, but an honorable one. You could say it's 'high risk, high reward.' Should they succeed, promotions surely await them as well as a good number of medals. They'd be hailed as heroes when they returned home and would be even more popular with the ladies than they were now!

The head general appeared satisfied as he gazed sternly at the company commander.

"Special Ops Commander Fisalis will now provide you with the details of the operation."

"Yes, sir!" the company commander briskly replied.

"Gah?! ...Was that a joke..." whispered the other soldiers behind him,

however, at the mention of my name. *Oh ho, I'll give you something to talk about!*

“What’s with the chatter? Is there something you’d like to say?”

“No, sir! Nothing, sir!” the soldiers replied with a bow when their commander turned to them in suspicion.

Looks like no one’s clued in the company commander on what happened at the rally. Sorry your subordinates’ behavior put you in a dangerous position.

Once the commotion had settled, I stepped out in front of the company. I found it hard to remain completely expressionless, and eventually I couldn’t hold back a grin. The soldiers’ expressions turned strained at the sight of my smile. *That’s right—you understand precisely what this smile means.*

When I looked over the company commander’s shoulder at my own subordinates, though, they weren’t making a peep. I could practically hear them thinking: ‘What is he smiling for?’ ‘That’s not a friendly smile, is it?’ ‘His smile scares me!’ ‘Does anyone else feel chilly all of a sudden?’ ‘So this poor guy is gonna be on the front lines out here *and* has no idea what went down at the rally?’ et cetera, et cetera.

Pretending not to see all this, I said, “Yes, my apologies for the short notice, but you men have been chosen to execute the operation I’m about to describe. It will be difficult, but I believe you will prevail. It would be no exaggeration to say that our kingdom’s hope of victory lies in your hands. Prepare yourselves to get to work immediately.”

I imparted the details of their ‘somewhat difficult’ [*That’s an understatement! -Corydalis*] mission to them thusly.

When I turned back to the company at the end of my explanation, every one of them looked petrified. *Heh, well... my own unit did say my strategy was ‘evil’!* I left the tent feeling as if a weight had been lifted from my chest.

“Seriously, what’s he thinking with that plan?”

“It’s fiendish, is what it is.”

“He’s gotta be some sort of closet sadist!”

“He sure looked like he was getting a kick out of it, didn’t he?”

“I thought my ears were deceiving me, but they weren’t!”

“Same.”

I could hear them muttering as I walked out.

What fools you lot are. You don’t actually think I gave a serious role like vanguard to a worthless company like you, even after what you did to Viola? My selecting you and whatever skills you can possibly offer was more or less for my own benefit. If you hadn’t harassed Viola, you’d probably never have been selected. You’re going to work like dogs to redeem yourselves—in more than one way.

◆ ◆ ◆ Extra Scene ◆ ◆ ◆

The First Cavalry Company immediately after the Special Ops Division Commander has left the tent:

“...it’s not like we can just pack up and go home if we refuse.”

“Exactly. We’ve practically got targets on our foreheads until we successfully complete the mission!”

“Yeah.”

“But we’ll be total heroes if we do succeed, right?”

“Right! You bet we will!”

“Yeah, and chicks dig heroes!”

“Let’s hear it for rich girls!”

“Alright, I say we show ’em what we got! No one’ll look down on us once we make it through his hellish training!”

“Huzzah!”

Behold, a group of dumb jocks on the brink of wetting themselves in fear have somehow found a silver lining. Among them, however, a single knight whispers, with a look of desperate, brief optimism, “...If I make it through this mission, I’m going to propose to my girl.”

“Dude, no ominous foreshadowing!”

And thus thanks to the First Company and their resolve, the day was won by believing in themselves. But the decisive battle and any victories were still a long ways away.

Several months later:

“What ever happened to that guy?”

“He made it home safe. And is absolutely whipped now.”

“...I guess that’s better than being dead.”

21 — About to Come Home

A month had passed since the troops had arrived at the frontlines and tension had escalated to all-out war. In the meantime, the lady knights continued to relay information and messages to me about the war's progress and the situation on the battlefield. Flür seemed to be the stronger side, and the messages they provided suggested we were approaching the final stretch.

Incidentally, ever since Mr. Fisalis had cracked down on a certain company, they had set forth with their operation with no complaints to be heard at headquarters. Apparently, the commanding officer had misbehaved and now the whole company was paying for it. Corydalis was very concerned that they would go bald or get ulcers from all the stress.

At last, news that the final curtain had fallen on the war, with the Flür Kingdom victorious, came to the capital. Of course, since my in-laws and I had been informed at that time that Mr. Fisalis and his subordinates were uninjured, we were all very relieved. Since we were so far from the battlefield in Rozhe, and the Flür army had the upper hand since day one, it was easy to forget that there even was a war happening. That's what it was like the whole time.

"A month to organize everything, then a month at war, for a grand total of two months. It was another surprisingly short battle," Lord Fisalis said admiringly. *I thought for sure that the previous skirmish took a little more time. We think back on that war often, it's true, but if that's the only recent war you can compare it to, no wonder he'd be resentful if it dragged on! ...But I digress.*

"It was indeed. They must have been very scrupulous in their planning." Lady Fisalis seemed to feel the same.

"Had the war gone on longer, many more people would have been injured and the national treasury would have taken a hit, too. It's better that it was over quickly. Not to mention that Mr. Fisalis and all his subordinates are uninjured, and that is certainly a good thing."

"You're right about that," agreed Lord Fisalis. "There will be cleaning up to do

for a while now, so it will probably be another month before they can return. The other frontline soldiers ought to be coming back in the order they left, though.”

It sounds like the frontline troops get to leave later and come home earlier, then. On the one hand, that seems like something that should be reserved for important individuals, but on the other hand, those who put their lives on the line probably would need to come home to recover from their injuries and replenish their strength. That makes sense.

“Cleaning up? Isn’t that the job of the Minister of War and the consuls?” my mother-in-law asked. I had no idea what ‘cleaning up’ entailed or who was supposed to do it, so I stayed quiet and listened, too. *I’ve been learning so many new things lately. Ceremonies and uniform colors, for instance. I wouldn’t need to know any of this if I’d continued to stay in the manor, but since I’ve been dragged out in public more frequently as of late, I can’t get away with saying, ‘Oh, I had no idea. Ah ha ha☆’ any more.*

Uh oh. Suddenly I’ve got a sinking feeling that I’m going to need to start reading up on a bunch of things I don’t really care about or understand. I mean, I’d be the laughingstock of the manor if I, the wife of a duke from a prestigious family, acted like an absolute blockhead.

I know I need to study more, but I’m terrible at it.

Oh. Am I imagining things, or did I just see a flash in Rohtas’ eyes?

I pretended not to notice him and went back to focusing on what my father-in-law was saying.

“The Minister of War, as well as the commander and lieutenant commander of the Special Ops unit, all need to be present for a signing. Normally, the king won’t go himself, so the prime minister and several consuls and civil servants will go as his proxies,” Lord Fisalis politely explained to me.

“I believe I understand now.”

“So *that’s* how it works.” My mother-in-law and I nodded.

Following the announcement that the war had ended, soldiers began to return to the capital one after another. Lord Fisalis was right; as I watched them

parade into town, it was nothing but a sea of green uniforms. They were all regular frontline soldiers.

Half a month later:

“The division members under the command of Commander Fisalis are scheduled to return to the capital today.” I swear the lady knight with the silver hair actually sparkled as she stated the day’s news.

I had been enjoying my after-breakfast tea when I received word that an envoy from the Royal Palace had arrived. When I made it to the entryway with Dahlia, I was greeted by Angelica, the gorgeous lady knight with hair like spun silver. She was the one who’d delivered the news of the special ops unit’s return.

But didn’t Lord Fisalis say it would take at least a month to clean up after the war? It’s only been half that long.

“Thank you so much for everything you’ve done for the kingdom, but isn’t Mr. Fisalis still busy with the aftermath? I didn’t think he could return home yet,” I expressed my confusion to Angelica.

“The commander and lieutenant commander did what they could ahead of time to make sure we could wrap up early. The both of them very much wanted to come home as soon as possible,” she explained.

I knew Mr. Fisalis wanted to get home fast, but Corydalis, too?! No, wait, I think I just didn’t want to imagine Corydalis wanting to come home, but I can totally see it now.

“You’re not going to be in trouble, are you?” I asked Angelica, surprised at how much freedom Mr. Fisalis and Corydalis apparently had.

“Oh, no, it’s fine! All that’s left is for the consuls to do. If we’ve got time to stand around and chat down there, then I’d like to go home! I mean, I’ve been down there this whole time, longer than the civil servants *or* troops! ...Oops, eh heh. I shouldn’t have said that. My humble apologies, Madam!” *Angelica’s brain-to-mouth filter seems to malfunction sometimes, doesn’t it? She’s not drunk, is she? The way she smiled when she giggled was so lovely, though, that I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear everything else she said.*

“Oh, not at all! Thank you so much for all your hard work! I hear that it’s thanks to the diligent efforts of the special ops division that the war was so short, and that we won in the first place. You all deserve to come home and take a vacation.”

“Thank you, Madam,” Angelica saluted in reply to my expression of appreciation.

I suppose she’ll join back up with the rest of the unit tomorrow, and then they’ll all march back home to give a report at the palace. She can take a little break here now, though!

“It’s been so long since Mr. Fisalis has been home. What’s it been, two and a half months? I can still feel his presence strongly, too, despite his long absence. The way he talked about his territory down there like he was guiding a tour group, the two massive sacks crammed full of fruit...”

“I know exactly what you mean, Madam,” Rohtas chimed in with a sarcastic smile.

After Angelica left, we returned to the salon and held an emergency conference composed of Rohtas, Dahlia, the servants, and I, in preparation to receive Mr. Fisalis. Mimosa stayed in her room since she wasn’t feeling well that day. Bellis was basically glued to her side to make sure she didn’t overexert herself.

“What does Mr. Fisalis have on his schedule after he returns to the capital?” I asked Rohtas, the obvious source for accurate information, since we’d have to plan accordingly.

“He will have to appear at the Royal Palace after arriving in the capital, first of all. There he will present a report, after which there would normally be a banquet in appreciation of the unit, but...” he trailed off, as if the remainder pained him to say. *Normal people would follow the usual custom, but Mr. Fisalis hadn’t been behaving normally. That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it, Rohtas?*

“...If I recall correctly, the entire division boycotted the last banquet and came here instead,” I said. *They were awfully... vigorous... when they got here, for people who skipped out claiming ‘total exhaustion.’ And then they just postponed the banquet until a later day. And then all the servants freaked out*

when Mr. Fisalis came home much sooner than they'd anticipated, if memory serves. That's riiight... That was when he picked a fight with Cartham, too.

"Correct. Which is why we need to have a plan this time in case all of that happens again," Rohtas said, eyes closed, but with a look of resignation.

"Sounds good to me." *Thought so.*

We weren't the same people we had been before, though. We'd been learning and evolving every day! What we'd experienced last time was an immediate learning experience. And from that we'd evolved even further!

They'll probably claim to be exhausted and skip the banquet this time too since they're the kind of people who, when they say that they want to go home, will do whatever it takes to do just that. *They'll totally do that; it's not hard to imagine.*

"O-Okay then. I'll come up with several possible outcomes, and then appropriate Cercis Shifts for each of them," I decided.

"Understood," Rohtas replied with a nod.

"It's been almost too long since our last Cercis Shift. I'm worried my mind will just go blank. Give me a moment to think things through." I closed my eyes and ran a simulation in my head.

The best case scenario would be: Mr. Fisalis attends the banquet → comes home completely exhausted → I say my hellos → and then off to bed.

This next one seems more likely, though: He boycotts the banquet → eats here → and then we go to bed. I'd say there's about an eighty percent chance of this happening.

The worst possible outcome would be: Mr. Fisalis and his subordinates all boycott the banquet and then explode through my front door → they sweep through the house like a tornado → the servants and I are completely exhausted. The war is over; you can stop charging at closed doors now, I angrily told them in my head. Let's pray this isn't what happens.

So, yeah. That's where I was mentally.

I opened my eyes and decided to start planning from what we would do in the

best case scenario.

“Dahlia, first I want you to clean Mr. Fisalis’ room just for good measure. He’ll probably be exhausted, and I want him to be comfortable.”

“Understood. I clean his room every day, but I will do it once more, and thoroughly,” Dahlia said cheerfully.

“Please do. Make sure his duvet has been properly aired out so we can give him an outstanding night’s sleep.”

“Ah, excellent idea, Madam! I shall prepare his room as if he were my own son.”

“Thank you.”

Why does Dahlia look so happy? Oh, well. Not important. On to the next scenario. Unlike last time, we’ll plan ahead so mealtime isn’t utter chaos.

“Have Cartham be ready to bring out the buffet. And make sure he’s prepared to serve some hors d’oeuvres and snacks that pair well with alcohol, and anything else that Mr. Fisalis could want. I want us to go the extra mile.”

“Of course, Madam.” Once Dahlia had nodded her assent, I moved on to the final scenario.

It’s unlikely to happen, but you can never be too prepared—not to mention those guys have a habit of defying expectations.

“Thinking about when he brought his subordinates back with him—and this is just in case—we’re better off having alcohol and snacks on hand, huh?”
Everyone in the special ops division sure likes to have a good time on Mr. Fisalis’ tab.

“I will have some ready and waiting. What I can acquire, anyway,” Rohtas affirmed with a long-suffering sigh. He’d need to prepare for the possibility of many people coming over. Look what happened last time—we weren’t overreacting in going to these lengths to prepare.

“So is there anything we might have missed? He’s bound to be looking forward to coming home, so everything needs to be perfect. He’s probably stressed after being in a strange land for so long, so I want him to be able to

relax. Oh, what about some flowers? I wonder if the ones he bought me are blooming,” I said restlessly as a million different things ran through my mind.

“Don’t fret, Madam. I’ll take care of that,” Rohtas offered with a smile.

“In that case, let’s get started right away. If we dawdle around, he’ll catch us off guard again!”

“But Madam, he isn’t coming home until tomorrow,” Rohtas interjected.

Oh yeah.

Guess I’m being a little hasty.

“Ah, yes, silly me,” I tried to brush it off, but squirmed in embarrassment. *I can’t let myself get carried away like that. What could it be that’s got me all worked up? How embarrassing that he had to correct me.*

“You seem very excited for Master’s return home, Madam.”

“Huh?” Rohtas’ comment had me frozen mid-step. *I seem excited?*

“You appear to be enjoying yourself preparing the house for his return.”

Really? I look happy? I’m just doing what I can to ensure Mr. Fisalis is comfortable and can relax when he comes home, though.

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 7, Cercis' Perspective

— Mr. Fisalis' Division Returns Home ◆ ◆ ◆

A military conference room, Aurantia: Following our victory, the Flür military, along with various civil servants, had occupied the Aurantian royal palace—processing war criminals, establishing an interim government, and that sort of thing. Corydalis and I had decided some venting about the civil servants plowing their way through stacks of paperwork to our side was in order.

“No more work for us.”

“You got that right, Commander. It sure is a good thing we got our jobs done quickly.”

“All that’s left is up to the civil servants to finish, so it’s completely out of our hands.”

“Ex-actly.”

“Shall we pack up and go, then?”

“Well, that *is* the reason we got everything done as fast as we could.”

Corydalis and I were about to exit the room, having come to the conclusion that we were clear to leave (and that we ought to pack up and make a break for it) when: “Did you say you’re going home?” Several civil servants raised their heads.

What now? Aren’t we allowed to leave yet? Our work is done! Why should we stay to just watch you all work? We have all the knights on guard duty for that. At this point, that’s all they’re good for.

We are not mere overseers!

“Yes. Our work should all be done now.”

“We’re beat, too. We were slaving away down here long before you guys got here. It’s been two and a half months. Sheesh,” Corydalis tried to reason with them, cracking his neck in a display of just how exhausted he was.

“You’re right. There’s no comparing what we’ve been through to marching in

after the war was over. Aside from the guards, the regular troops have already returned. I'd like to send my men home soon, too, in appreciation of their hard work."

"Aww, Commander, you do care!"

Wouldn't you know it, though, the civil servants didn't so much as reply.

I see how it is.

"...Fine, you can leave," a consul reluctantly agreed.

"Thanks. I'll leave the rest to you."

"Woohoo! We're outta here!" Corydalis cried, pumping his fist in the air.

Our little charade had worked.

"I'm going to go pack up. Inform the others."

"Roger!"

I got on my horse, who was waiting outside, and rode off as fast as he would go.

"YAAAAAY!" was the reply I received when I told the other division members. *I'm with you on that one, guys. I can't wait to get home, either!*

"I'm aiming for a new record for the fastest time home! Wait for me, Viola!"

"Wait for me, ooo!" most cried, as well—inserting their own lover or spouse's name, of course.

"Oh, shut up, would you?! Some of us are single, you know!" yelled one man, tears streaming down his face. Apparently he didn't have anyone to go home to. *He should be more optimistic... When he does get home, he can get started on the dating game.*

"All of you! Quit your yelling! Shut up and ride!" Mr. Fisalis shouted at them, with a look on his face that said heads were going to roll if they didn't obey. *Why are you angry? I thought you wanted to go home, too. Oh well, none of my business.*

And so, we took off down the road at a full gallop, our sights set on the capital.

◆ ◆ ◆ Extra Scene ◆ ◆ ◆

🐼 Some Random Village Along the Highway 🐼

RUMBLERUMBLERUMBLE

Villager A: What's that, an earthquake?

Villager B: Oh, I hear it too. I think it's coming from the south.

A: Me too. You don't think it could be a gang of rogues from down there about to attack us?!

B: Doubt it. The war's been over for half a month! And on top of that, we won!

A: I guess you're right.

RRRRRRRUMBLERUMBLERUMBLE

A: The earthquake's closing in on us!

B: What's that?! I can just make out a cloud of dust!

The special ops division gallops by at full throttle.

A: ...The heck was that just now?

B: Who knows...?

22 — His Return Home

Yesterday we finished all of our work in preparation for Mr. Fisalis's homecoming. So all that was left for the day was to double-check everything.

"Mr. Fisalis' room, check."

"Buffet ready to go in the kitchen, check."

"Alcohol and snacks restocked, check."

We can't afford to overlook anything, so I'm saying everything out loud as I go along! Then again, I'm pretty sure the word 'overlook' simply doesn't exist in our servants' vocabularies. This is mostly to make myself feel better.

I went along, checking things off my list, making sure that we'd be ready for Mr. Fisalis to come back in *any manner or mood imaginable*.

We'll be ready for anything he can throw at us!

"He can come home at any time now!"

The preparations to welcome Mr. Fisalis home were complete. Since we were currently in In-Law Shift, meaning I was unable to wander around in my maid uniform, I had been cleaning in some of my regular clothes, so I changed into something a little nicer. I had Dahlia fix my makeup, and I braided my hair. My transformation was complete—I was all ready, too.

"There. All primped and prepped."

"The only question is when Mr. Fisalis will come back."

"That's difficult to say, indeed."

"Yeahhh. Now that everything's done, I guess I'll just wait for him in the salon. There's no point in running around."

"Yes, Madam."

It was already well into the afternoon. I really couldn't say when he'd be back, but it seemed too early yet, so I followed Dahlia to the salon.

When I got to the salon, I found I wasn't alone.

“Oh, hello, Vi. We thought we’d wait here, too,” said my mother-in-law from where she was elegantly sipping some tea on a sofa with my father-in-law.

You’re a little early! ...ahem. Um, phew, okay. I’m fine now.

Look at this wonderful display of parental love! They were waiting in anticipation of their darling (?) son’s return from war!

According to what I heard from Dahlia earlier, back when Mr. Fisalis just let himself go completely off the rails... ahem, I mean, when he let his mistress wrap him around her finger... er, I mean, Mr. Fisalis’ parents were overly strict with him when he was a child, so he grew up never knowing affection or what it was like to be doted on. But I never got that impression from his parents myself. They’re always smiling, and they don’t mind at all that I like to garden. I can’t imagine them ever being cruel. Now’s not the time to be thinking about that, though.

They certainly appear as if they care about him, excitedly waiting here for him to come home from the battleground. It sure seems that way to me, at least.

Then again, Mr. Fisalis was sort of going through a rebellious phase back then, albeit a late one. He was acting out just to upset his parents, so that probably only made things worse. And boy, he didn’t hold back when he misbehaved, either—getting the whole manor and even my own family involved. If he were my brother, Mother would’ve sent the little brat to bed without dinner, but not before she got an apology! She’s terrifying when she’s angry.

Ehh, I’ll leave my own family out of this.

“Don’t just stand there, Viola—come and have some tea,” I heard Lord Fisalis say, forcing me to return to reality from my thoughts of parental love and post-teenage rebellious phases.

Well, that was... illuminating.

Approaching my in-laws canoodling on the sofa, I took a seat in an armchair, being careful not to wrinkle my dress. According to my maids’ instructions—which I really didn’t understand—I should ‘dress especially cute because Master is finally coming home!’ so obviously that meant the only option was to wear a light, airy dress with extra tailoring around the waist that made for a

voluminous, flattering silhouette. And yet, although the goal was to make me more adorable than usual, they strangely also dressed me in petticoats to hide my movements.

So now I need to be extra cautious, even though I'm basically wearing regular clothes. It's probably my fault for not being used to petticoats yet.

In the time it took me to straighten my skirt, the maid had brewed my tea.

"Goodness, I wonder when he'll be back. It seems like he was back from his last business trip much sooner," Lord Fisalis suddenly said with a smile, staring through the doorway to the entrance.

Little did he know, Mr. Fisalis returned home so quickly last time because he skipped the banquet. Naturally, I did not voice that little factoid out loud and merely blew on my tea to cool it down. I did my best to be careful as I lifted my cup and saucer to my mouth; it would have been a terrible time to make a mess. *Steady... Steady...*

...But wait. How did Lord Fisalis know that Mr. Fisalis came home earlier last time? He and Lady Fisalis were away in the countryside then! That must mean...

I stared at Rohtas, who in turn, refused to meet my gaze. Culprit apprehended.

Well, now that I know who the culprit was, mystery solved.

I felt my face begin to turn red as my father-in-law grinned at me knowingly.

"Er, you see, Mr. Fisalis and all of his subordinates were positively exhausted, so the banquet was actually postponed. They were very, verrrry tired!" I tried to explain, making sure to emphasize how worn out they had been. *Yes, so exhausted that they didn't even get out of bed the next morning. It was very sad. And when they did finally get up, I could tell they were only putting on tough faces. Why are you looking at me like that? That's really how it happened!*

My mother-in-law, however, did not seem to buy it.

"Tee hee. I'm sure they were. They must have felt much better then when they saw you. If they were so exhausted that they could barely move after a

two-week business trip, I can't imagine how they're going to feel after a two-month one! All their letters did say they wanted to come home as soon as they could, though..." she said with a pleasant expression as she watched me sweat bullets.

She's teasing me, isn't she? Regardless, the servants and I have anticipated three possible outcomes, and boycotting the banquet is still the number one contender.

It eventually approached the time when we expected Mr. Fisalis to come home, assuming he was following the pattern we thought he would.

As we were drinking our tea, waiting for him, a maid came into the room and announced, "There is a royal envoy at the entrance."

"An envoy, you say?" Rohtas questioned as his eyebrows rose up his forehead.

"Yes," the maid replied, her own eyebrows tilting down in a confused frown.

"I see. Please pardon me for a moment," Rohtas said before excusing himself from the salon with a bow.

"A royal envoy?" Lady Fisalis cocked her head.

"If Mr. Fisalis is soon to arrive, shouldn't we be getting an announcement of that, not a royal envoy?" I asked, cocking my head, too, as I looked at the door where Rohtas had exited. Royal envoys usually brought messages from the Royal Palace and His Majesty the king (such as royal rescripts and orders). What should have arrived before Mr. Fisalis was due home was simply an advance messenger.

So sure was I that Mr. Fisalis would skip the banquet and come straight home, I hadn't considered the possibility of a royal envoy.

"Perhaps something has happened," suggested Lord Fisalis.

As we all whispered amongst ourselves about what the arrival of a royal envoy could mean, the door to the salon opened a second time and Rohtas came back in from listening to the envoy. He gave us a slightly grim smile as we stared at him keenly, waiting for him to tell us what the envoy said.

“Master and the special division have returned to the capital safely and are presently at the Royal Palace. He will be attending the banquet this evening, and so will be returning home rather late,” Rohtas informed us matter-of-factly.

“Huh?”

“Eh?”

“*WHAT?*”

It wasn't like we planned to or anything, but the three of us all reacted in basically the same way. That was its own surprise. I was the one who was extra shocked there at the end.

Please pretend you didn't read that.

“He's staying for the banquet...!”

“I can't believe it!”

“Mr. Fisalis is actually going to participate in a work event like a mature adult...”

“Well, that's the obvious thing to do, of course, but then again, this is *him* we're talking about...” my father-in-law correctly pointed out.

“Goodness me, Madam! You've spilled tea on your dress!”

“Oh no! Vi!”

“What? You're kidd— Noooo!”

“Oh nooo, Viiii!”

“A towel, quick! And something to cool her down!”

In my shock, I'd completely emptied the contents of my cup all over my skirt.

Wh-What's going on? I'm all confused and there's something warm on me.

My in-laws descended into panic off to my side over the piping hot tea I had spilled on myself; meanwhile I just stared blankly in confusion. Luckily for me, the voluminous dress I was wearing that day absorbed most of the tea, so only a small amount actually made it onto my legs. The hot liquid didn't make direct contact with my skin thanks to the dress and the petticoats I was wearing, so I

avoided being burned. I guess I wore the right thing at the right time after all! ...Granted, petticoats were probably never intended for burn prevention.

“I can feel something a little warm, but I’m wearing a petticoat under my dress today, so really, I’m fine! Ohhh, but I’ve gone and stained my clothes now...” I tried to reason amid the chaos, but my statement was lost among the ‘towel!’, ‘ice!’, ‘a change of clothes!’, and ‘now!’

“Never mind the stain, dear! Ah, here, dab at it! Rohtas, honey, please step out of the room for a second— I need to lift up her skirt!” Lady Fisalis said, thus banishing the men from the salon. It was the right choice, considering I spilled the tea on my lap, and it would have been embarrassing to have my skirt pulled up that high in their presence. *Good thinking, Mother Fisalis!*

We were quick in our response, so the area affected was only a bit red, rather than scalded. I started to blot at the stain on my soiled dress.

Wehhh, my dressssss.

My in-laws were visibly relieved when I told them I was okay after I came back from changing my clothes yet again. I thought they had overreacted a little bit, but I was grateful that they cared. How lucky I was to have such nice in-laws!

Now that the problem was solved and everyone had calmed down, Lord Fisalis commented, “Well, now that we know he’s staying for the banquet, presumably to the surprise of all, it sounds as if he won’t be coming home until quite late.”

“So it does,” Rohtas replied in agreement.

“Hmm. In that case, why don’t we all have dinner without him? It’s been some time, but you don’t mind us eating here, do you, Viola?” Lord Fisalis asked me.

“Why, of course!”

“And what shall we do afterward? Rather... what are you going to do, Vi?” Lady Fisalis then asked.

By ‘afterward,’ you mean, until Mr. Fisalis comes home, right? I’m no good at staying up late, but considering that this is the best possible outcome, I’m gonna

give it a shot! I mean, my most important duty as a wife is to greet him when he comes home after finishing some very important work!

I'm sure some of the servants will still be awake (they always are!), so I can probably sit and chat with them in the servants' dining room while I wait. Er, maybe it's more like take a nap in the servants' dining room while I wait.

"I'll stay up and wait for him," I told my mother-in-law. "Will you be going back to the cottage? I can call for you when Mr. Fisalis comes home."

"No, we'll wait here with you, too. We're already here, after all. If we get tired, we'll just take a nap. Or perhaps you have a guest room available?"

"Oh, of course! Feel free to use any of the available rooms!" *Ohhh. Okay. You'll wait here. They really do care about their son! It's so wonderful to see the bond between child and parent in play!*

There go my plans of waiting in the servants' dining room if my in-laws are going to wait here, too, though. It was a nice plan while it lasted. Looks like I'll be staying up with my in-laws in the salon instead. I'll have to do my best to not lose consciousness!

We did not need to stay up too late, however, because Mr. Fisalis came home rather quickly. It was somewhat later than my usual bedtime, but there was still a significant amount of time before morning.

"I'm home! Finally! Ah, it's so good to see you, Viola!"

We received a prior announcement, so Lord and Lady Fisalis, along with the servants, had been waiting by the door, but the first words out of Mr. Fisalis' mouth when he came in were directed toward me, and came with a big hug.

"Oh, Viola. It's really you. I'm home!"

"You're... squishing me." He hasn't changed a bit—that is, he still doesn't understand how strong he is! I can hear my spine cracking and warping under the force of his hug! Not to mention everyone is watching! Great, now he's rubbing his cheek in my hair. Relax, please.



Did he even notice his parents and everyone else? Hey, look around you!

I had all the strength of a kitten batting at a piece of string compared to him, but that didn't stop me from pounding against his arm in an attempt to persuade him to free me.

"We-Welcome home, Mr. Fisalis! I am very happy to see you are doing well, but you are suffocating me. Mr. Fisalis. Please let go. Please, it hurts."

He gasped.

"Did someone hurt you?!"

"You. You are hurting me now."

"Oh, me?"

After some gentle prodding, he loosened his grip at last.

Ahhh. Just in the nick of time for my poor back.

I pushed again where he had loosened his grip and finally made some space between us. I tried to get away, but to no avail, because he simply grabbed me around my middle from behind, trapping me in his arms.

If my options are this or getting my back broken, I guess I'll take this.

That didn't stop me from trying to push his arms away with my own, though. When I finally made some leeway and looked up at him, he was peering at me with his dark brown eyes crinkled in joy. He didn't have bags under his eyes or appear haggard—in fact, he was still as handsome as ever. His facial features perhaps looked ever so slightly sharper than before he had left for the campaign.

Despite having put on a rare serious expression when he had told me was going to leave, he'd seemed very eager and willing to go (and everyone else discouraged, for some reason), and then proceeded to send me all sorts of letters from the field that made me want to tear my hair out. Everything he had done up until and while he was away flashed through my mind.

His journey to the frontlines hasn't changed him at all, and yet... he seems tougher, somehow. There's a lot about him that I wish was different, but I'm

definitely glad that he made it home safely.

I reached for his face, and gently stroked his cheek.

“Did you lose weight? You must have worked yourself to the bone.”

Mr. Fisalis’ eyes widened in surprise at my words of praise.

Oh no, did he not like that?

I went to draw my hand back when I saw his reaction, but he grabbed my hand with his own and pulled it back to his cheek. As I stood there, letting him rub my hand against his face, a wide grin soon appeared across his face.

“I really must have! But just having you stroke my face like this makes it feel like the exhaustion is melting away,” he boldly said.

Hold up. Check yourself, Viola. What the heck were you just doing?! I was totally touching his face! Of my own accord! And then I was cradling it! And stroking it! Gyaaah! I’m gonna die on the spot!

Suddenly getting a bad feeling, I nervously looked up at everyone else in the room. Sure enough, my in-laws and all of the servants were staring at us with looks of faint disgust and secondhand embarrassment.

Just as my own embarrassment felt like it was about to take a physical form and overflow from my body, out of nowhere Lord Fisalis said, in a mix of exasperation and ridicule, “Er, I’m sorry to interrupt your passionate reunion, but we’re all still here. Be more aware of your surroundings, Cercis. Save the romance for later.”

They must have been watching and hoping he’d remember they were there for a rather long time. Wish he would have interrupted sooner instead of just waiting.

“Oh, you’re here, Father. I’m finally home,” Mr. Fisalis said. The affectionate smile he had given me disappeared and was replaced with a look of indifference as he did so. I couldn’t help but notice the change.

“...Why, you! Is that any way to greet your parents?!” Lord Fisalis thoroughly scolded him.

“But I’m exhausted.”

“...It’s plain to see that the way you treat us is entirely different from how you treat Viola.”

“Well, naturally, yes,” Mr. Fisalis replied nonchalantly.

It was just like a scene from a comedy play, but then Lord Fisalis’ demeanor turned more pleasant. I could see it in his eyes that he was glad to see Mr. Fisalis walk through the door in one piece!

“I suppose being able to hold Viola like that does make you feel better...”

“Oh, no, we didn’t do all that much down there, we mostly just stood around. I’m not tired at all,” Mr. Fisalis said, hugging me again and nuzzling his face into the top of my head.

Although I was impressed by how much he seemed to have matured despite the arrogance, since he had decided to stay for the banquet at the Royal Palace, he was still his usual self after all. Yup, that’s just how he is.

So, although he was behaving contrary to everyone’s expectations, Mr. Fisalis made it home safe and sound.

Looks like my life with him is starting all over again. Back to living with the sappy man who wrote those tooth-rotting letters to me while he was away, I was thinking to myself, when:

“Ohh, Viola!” the man in question blurted out in front of everyone, using the same bedroom tone of voice he had used in the letters! He was back to his old ways, but now with ten times the sap.

Even though his features and overall silhouette looked a little sharper and leaner, this only made him appear all the more dignified. *Grrrr. Something will have to be done about that,* I thought enviously, as he continued to hug me.

It was at that very moment, too, with his face at point-blank range to mine, that I realized the two of us were still in the entryway. He hadn’t even taken off his overcoat yet, since he had come straight from the Royal Palace. *Stop hugging me and go to his room for some rest, is what he should be doing! Maybe I ought to try to have him do that! Instead of just standing around talking and hanging all over me.*

“I imagine you must be tired, Mr. Fisalis. We’ve run you a hot bath and there’s a warm bed waiting for you. The *servants* really went all out to prepare everything. It seems you’re going to have a busy schedule tomorrow, too, so please take this opportunity to rest up!” I said as I gently removed Mr. Fisalis’ hands from my body, around which he was still wrapped, and half dragged, half guided him to his room.

Look, the sooner you go to bed, the sooner we can all relax! We’re already working overtime. You can try to resist or argue, but you’re going to bed now! We all want to go to bed too, so I’m not giving in to any tantrums! I told myself as I resolutely dragged him along.

He’d normally protest around that point, but he actually said, “Oh, great! That makes me so happy! I can’t exactly say the sleeping arrangements down there were comfortable so, yeah, I think I *will* take it easy for the rest of the night. I’ll have plenty of time to tell you about everything later,” he said, obediently taking my hand and walking with me toward his room.

What. That was... anticlimactic.

Even Rohtas and Dahlia were surprised to see him act that way. Rohtas’ face didn’t give much away, but his eyebrows rose ever so slightly, and I noticed Dahlia’s cheek twitch for maybe half a second.

Okay, but I’m more concerned than surprised by what he said. Why did he put so much emphasis on ‘plenty’? It’s not like he’s going to be sent on another business trip or campaign any time soon, right?

“You-You certainly will! I can’t wait to hear all about it tomorrow!”

“Great. Well then, Father, Mother, I’m going to see myself to bed now. Thank you for waiting here for me,” he turned and said to his parents from halfway up the stairs, as if he’d only remembered them just then.

“Of course, of course. Have a good night.”

“Sleep well, dear!” They replied, their words tinged with shock at Mr. Fisalis’ obedient response to my suggestion.

And so, Mr. Fisalis let himself be led into the closet in his room... I mean, to the door to his room.

His sudden obedience has left a bad taste in my... No, I mean it was super weird... No, I guess it was kind of disappointing.

“Sleep well, Mr. Fisalis.”

“Good night, Viola,” he replied, giving me a gentle hug before releasing me with a smile and retreating into his room.

I returned to my own room once I heard his door shut.

“...He actually listened to me...” I mumbled as I trembled in shock.

“He did indeed...” Dahlia said with an expression somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

Don't act like you weren't shocked just a minute ago, too! But, yeah, lately he's been acting rude, and has been overly-sentimental and clingy. What could it be? Normally he simply wouldn't show up at events he didn't want to go to, but today he actually stayed for one of them, and he was even in a good mood afterwards, too. Did he hit his head while he was away? Or is he just acting funny because he really is exhausted?

Dahlia stood to the side as I muttered to myself, deep in thought.

“What in heaven's name is she...” she murmured, rubbing her temples and sighing.

So he gets back in town—positively gushing melodrama, I assume—and then actually participates in a work function, and then listens to instructions here without causing the servants (especially Rohtas!) or me any trouble at all... He's really grown u— Er, he sure has changed. I wonder what could have caused it. There's no way to ask him now that he's off to dreamland, though.

Even Rohtas and Dahlia, my usual fallbacks, have no clue what's going on, which leaves vague guessing as my only option.

At any rate, looks like tomorrow will be my first day living with a somewhat more mature (in more ways than one) Mr. Fisalis! ...I'm not even sure how to respond to him now. Will I be able to keep my cool? Ha, if tonight was any indication, that might be kinda hard!

...For now, anyway...

Can someone please explain what's going on?!

To be continued

Side Story Scenes from Following Duchess Fisalis on Her Date ♦ ♦ ♦ Rohtas' office, the Fisalis manor ♦ ♦ ♦

The night before the outing: The manor was completely silent after another day had drawn to a close and everyone had retired to their rooms. Light shone out from the crack below the door of Rohtas' office, illuminating a small patch of the otherwise dark house. Inside, Rohtas, Bellis, and the head of the manor's private guards stood face-to-face.

There was one reason why the three of them had gathered there, and that was to work out a plan to guard the duchess on the outing she had been compelled to take the next day.

"I'm sure you are already aware, but Master and Madam are going on an excursion tomorrow," Rohtas told the other two.

"We are," the head guard and Bellis replied in unison.

Rohtas nodded in acknowledgment before continuing.

"This is no different than usual, so I expect you already know what to do, but I want you two to escort Master and Madam tomorrow. I do, however, have a concern. Master does not wish to use the carriage this time, but to go on foot," Rohtas related, recalling what Cercis had, in turn, told him.

Until then, Cercis would have never even considered walking into town. Cercis had reined in his elitism in order to meet Viola and her commoner sensibilities halfway, saying that he wanted to make her happy, and had found his suggestion readily accepted by her.

'Compromise' had not been in Cercis' vocabulary until then. Rohtas wanted to consider Cercis' feelings, as unusual as they were, but he knew that granting his master's request would be difficult.

"That is going to be... challenging," the head guard replied after a momentary grimace. He did not know Viola very well, having had no regular contact with her. He was normally too busy checking for weak points in the manor security.

It was not as if he did not like Viola, though. In fact, he was glad that Cercis had left his mistress for her, his legal wife.

“Madam seems pleased at the thought of walking, though,” Bellis argued, his eyes softening in emotion.

The head guard gave Bellis a look, as if to say, “what the hell are you talking about?” Rohtas, on the other hand, nodded in agreement, apparently thinking the same as Bellis.

“That is just what I was thinking. But from a security perspective, going on foot has its dangers, just as the captain here was saying. No threat would be able to reach them inside a carriage, and security would have an easier time also, as they are well acquainted with escorting in that manner. Foot travel, on the other hand, leaves one’s entire body exposed. Regardless, we cannot allow Master and Madam to be knowingly exposed to danger.”

“Of course not,” Bellis and the head guard nodded with dual looks of obedience.

“Be prepared for a higher level of security than usual.”

“Are you certain it actually *is* acceptable for them to walk, then?” the captain of the guard continued to question Rohtas.

“Yes. Madam will enjoy herself walking into town. She does not care for pageantry. Should worse come to worst, Master is quite capable of protecting her, so I am certain everything will be just fine.” Rohtas ended his explanation with a grin that clearly dared anyone to question him further.

Seeing that his window to press the issue had been closed, the captain of the guard had no choice but to trust in Cercis’ abilities as a knight, and gave in, simply replying, “Yes, sir.”

“I’ll have my spies come out, too,” Bellis added agreeably, breaking his silence.

“I’m counting on you. Anyone Viola recognizes, have them watch from just out of sight. The guards she doesn’t know can dress as commoners and escort her and Master from nearby.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” the head guard replied to Rohtas’ proposal. Bellis nodded along.

“In that case, I will see you both tomorrow.”

And with that, the group broke up, plan in mind.

The day of the outing: The guards in their commoner disguises and Bellis’ spies had all gathered in the servants’ dining room. The other servants stood and watched, smirking at everyone in their strange attire.

Rohtas, Bellis, and the captain of the guard stood in the front and told the group the plan to be followed that day.

“Men, make use of Madam’s blind spots and guard her from where she can’t see you. The route for the day will be the bakery, followed by the confectioner’s just as Rohtas told you. They may, however, drop by other locations according to Madam’s fancy. Visualize other places she might wish to go, then send a single man ahead to scope out the area for suspicious persons or potential dangers. If you see anyone suspicious, eliminate them on the spot. *Do not* let Madam see you.”

“Yes, sir!” the spies replied to Bellis before moving out.

“Guardsmen, Madam is unlikely to recognize any of you, so you are to play the parts of commoners and escort her from more close by. Take care not to be discovered when you are near her. Make sure one of you doesn’t follow her for too long—switch every so often. Got it? Report to your posts.”

“Yes, sir!” the manor’s private guards replied to their captain’s orders. They would all fall into position on the street and casually pass the duke and duchess by as they went around town.

“Those of you staying behind in the manor, do not let on that Madam is going to be escorted.”

“Yes, sir!” the servants responded to Rohtas. There was something of a difference in their enthusiasm compared to the others. There was a faint warmth to their reply.

It would be a few more hours until Cercis and Viola’s date.

◆ ◆ ◆ Several days before the outing, the special ops division department ◆ ◆ ◆

“So, like, I heard the commander’s been seen around town stopping in the popular shops and stuff. Is it true? Do you guys know anything about this?” lieutenant commander Corydalis asked the other division members standing around the department.

“Oh, that. Yeah, it’s true. I heard he’s been seeking out the lady knights and the other women who work in the offices and asking them questions,” one of them offhandedly replied.

“The lady knights and the office girls... What’s he up to now?” Corydalis muttered, his head already swimming.

“It must be for something to do with his wife, right?”

“Duh, everyone knew that already.”

“That was the first time I’d ever seen the commander act so... devoted. I guess people really *can* change,” everyone started offering up, one by one, leaving Corydalis to press on the inner corners of his eyes to alleviate an oncoming headache.

“Sure, that’s got to be it.” *His wife does like commoner stuff*, Corydalis thought, as he remembered the times he’d met Viola before.

The old Cercis didn’t consider what his friends or partners might like, instead usually shopping and dining at high-end establishments catering to the elite, so he had never actually bothered to ask the people he knew for advice on what was popular. The young ladies he used to court and lovers he had fancied for longer periods were both fans of that kind of extravagant lifestyle from the start.

Cercis now, however, was completely different. Now it appeared as though he was scoping out stores his luxury-adverse wife might actually enjoy.

“...Where would a one-percenter like him even shop? I mean, all the popular places in town are geared towards commoners, right?” Corydalis muttered.

“I’m positive he’ll go to Dandelion’s Bakery and Lemon Myrtle’s

Confectionary!” Chamomile declared, brimming with confidence.

“What makes you so sure?” Corydalis looked dubious, despite Chamomile’s energetic thumbs-up and wink.

“Because we’re talking about the most popular stores right now, and those two are it! Everyone’s recommending them to each other,” Angelica replied with a smile that shone almost as brightly as her silver hair.

“What do you mean ‘everyone’?”

“As in, all of the people the commander asked,” Alkanna said, choosing to speak up just then.

“Haaah? And how do ya know all that?” Corydalis still did not understand them and furrowed his brows in skepticism.

“Because everyone starts chit-chatting whenever something strange happens.”

“At some point, all the women in the military just put their heads together.”

“And since something was clearly up, we held an emergency gossip session.”

“Exactly!” The Bombshell Trio all agreed.

There weren’t very many women employed by the military, even including the knights and the office workers. As a result, not only did their sense of sisterhood span across units and departments, it functioned rather like a free-flowing pipe that connected all of them. This intelligence network was reputed to be the fastest, most accurate, and most secure of any in existence. Women in the military are in a league all their own.

“So after we all exchanged info, we had overwhelming evidence that those two stores were it.”

“No one reported that the commander was conducting this research with other women, though,” Corydalis commented.

“Of course not. It would be social suicide if he were to just walk up to and start chatting with all sorts of random women and there was some kind of misunderstanding!”

“Mmmhmm. Not to mention, he rarely ignores the intel that we military ladies have to give.”

“Which is why there can only be two places he’s going to go!” the three of them said triumphantly.

“You ladies freak me out a little.” Corydalis’ entire face spasmed. “ ...Bakery aside, though, I think I heard that the line for that confectioner’s gets awfully long,” he said once he regained control of his facial muscles.

“Right. I heard that the confectioner’s shop and the associated cafe next door both feature eat-in only sweets, so you almost have to wait half the day just to get in. My girlfriend pestered me to go on my day off—and, boy, did we have to wait,” one of the knights testified.

The lieutenant commander folded his arms.

“I see. So then chances are high that the commander won’t even get in if he goes,” Corydalis concluded before letting his imagination run wild for a moment. *What a laugh, just imaging a queue packed full of snobby dukes. That’ll never happen. This is Cercis we’re talkin’ about. Wonder if he’ll use his status to get in. Nah, his wife wouldn’t take that lying down.*

“It would serve the commander right if he had to stand in line, but I’d feel so bad if Madam had to wait in that line all day!” one of the lady knights said piteously.

“You’ve got that right. He’d just want to ditch her and go in.”

“Or what if Madam didn’t feel well while waiting in line and passed out?! I know that’s unlikely to happen, but I can’t think of anything worse!” The Bombshell Trio began to spiral into sorrow, then angst, and then finally panic. They scorned Cercis but positively treasured Viola.

“You guys are acting like standing in line is literal torture. Standin’ around might make for a nice time for a couple,” Corydalis retaliated. *How’d they start with waitin’ in line and end with losing consciousness?*

“Wow, Lieutenant Commander, what are you, a little girl?”

“Ooooh, you want some ice for that burn?”

“LMAO.”

“Wait a minute, Lieutenant Commander doesn’t even have a girlfriend! Despite being friends with *us*!” one of the knights wheezed while the others laughed. “Ouch, oh god, my stomach hurts!”

“Can it! All of you!” Corydalis yelled as his face turned as red as a tomato before recovering and smirking. “Grrrrr... Hmph. ...I have to admit, though, I would like to see the look on his face while he’s on a date. I’d kill to see that.”

“Yes, yes, we would too!” came the loud reply.

“Now, not that I’d doubt that a *duke* of all people couldn’t handle himself on a simple date, but no matter how nice of a town this is, it can’t hurt to be a little extra careful, right? So I think we all ought to escort him!” Corydalis proposed after another speedy recovery.

“Good thinking!”

Now that Corydalis had successfully roped the others in, they’d gone straight into full-on conspiracy mode. Still, everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves all the while.

“Here’s one possibility. The confectioner’s is packed, but there’s some hoodlums lying in wait. Commander and his wife are sitting ducks.”

“They sure would be!”

“There, see? I’m thinkin’... if we reserve the whole cafe, disguise ourselves as customers, and secure the perimeter, then there’d be no space for bad guys! That would make it easier to guard him,” Corydalis suggested as a slick grin spread across his face.

“Ohhh! That’s a great idea! So we’d just take over the cafe!”

“Plus, we’d get to eat some of the most popular cakes right now!”

“Two birds with one stone, guys!”

The whole division was in agreement, although their motives differed between them.

“Now that we’ve settled that, we just need to come up with a plan to make

the reservation. First, we'll need to find out when he's going."

"Me, me! Lieutenant Commander!"

"What is it, Chamomile?" Corydalis asked, whipping his hand through the air to point at the blonde.

"Taking the military's schedule into consideration, I suspect that the day of the date will be on the commander's next day off, which also happens to be a public holiday."

"You're almost certainly correct. He's unlikely to let that chance pass him by, since he's leaving for a campaign soon after," agreed Corydalis.

"Indeed."

"Now for the time..."

"I would think sometime in the afternoon."

"Why is that, Angelica?" Corydalis cocked his head at Angelica's conclusion.

"Because I told the commander that I thought it would be nice to go to Lemon Myrtle's for afternoon tea when he was asking me about shops!"

That would be a first—our blue-blooded Cercis going on a normal-person date. It makes sense, then, that he'd take a commoner, or at least someone who goes to those places, at their word, Corydalis figured.

"Good job, guys! Operation Cafe Occupation is a go! I'm sure you'll all be there. Or at least as many as the place can seat. First come, first served, as they say," he then announced to the others.

"What? But I have worrrrk."

"Lucky you! That's my day off! I'll have to convince my husband to go!"

"I'm off that day, too! ...Wonder if I'll have the time to find a date..."

Corydalis' announcement was met with an eruption of voices, some happy, some not so much.

"One more thing: come dressed in a good disguise! And bring someone else with you, for sure. Real men don't go to cute confectioner's shops alone! I don't wanna see that, either! So all you poor schmucks without girlfriends or wives,

bring someone. I don't care if it's your sister or even your mom. *Do not* bring another guy. That'll just make it weird. If we don't have enough people for a reservation, we can even bring people from the other departments."

"Roger!"

...And thus the chivalric order seized control of Lemon Myrtle's Confectioner's.

And then came the day of the duke and duchess' outing. All was well until midway through, with the division heartily enjoying spying on... er, *guarding* the couple, but their occupation of the cafe was discovered soon enough when Viola spotted Chamomile.

Incidentally, the Fisalis manor's own private guards were waiting outside the premises the entire time. They had disguised themselves as patrons standing in line. Corydalis happened to notice the captain of Cercis' guards when he glanced outside and gave them a little nod.

"Everyone wanted to try the dine-in only cakes they have here, but didn't want to have to wait in line... so we thought, why not just reserve the place for the whole squad? Look at it this way—we can protect the two of you at the same time!" Corydalis explained, left with little other choice after being found out.

"We don't need your protection."

"You don't need to say it that harshly."

"But why today of all days? You could have made the reservation for any other day."

"Well, no. We all decided that if a certain VIP customer was coming today, we had to come, too."

"And who is that customer, might I ask?"

"You, of course!"

At that very moment, the whole division turned around in their chairs, with big smiles on their faces, to face Cercis and Viola. Cercis held his head in his hands.



◆ ◆ ◆ Thus Spake the Shopkeepers ◆ ◆ ◆

☞ The Patisserie's Statement ☞

"What's that? You want to reserve the whole shop for a dessert party? Yes, we can certainly do that."

An order of knights made a reservation earlier as a treat for their boss and his wife. Which department were they from? I believe they said they were a special operations division.

Oh, you've heard of them! Yes, Duke Fisalis and his wife paid us a visit. You'd like me to tell you about it? Well, sure.

You had better believe I was surprised when those knights suddenly appeared and asked to rent out the place. We hadn't even been in the capital for six months, so no one had ever made reservations for a party before. They instructed me to reserve the whole cafe from just after noon until early evening, to make sure that the best seats would be saved for the duke and duchess, and to have plenty of cakes and sweets ready to serve. At first I wasn't sure what the "best seats" actually were, but I understood what they meant when the day of the party finally came: it was a surprise party.

The plan was to do something the boss and his wife would enjoy. Golly, just seeing folks doing something nice like that for their boss made me feel all warm inside. I was in awe over how much they must have idolized their boss to do that for him.

Needless to say, I put all my skill into those pastries to make sure that gentleman was treated right! Then again, I was in the back the whole time, so I don't actually know exactly what happened on the shop floor. If you'd like a more detailed account, why don't you ask one of the staff?

☞ The Hostess' Statement ☞

What was it like that day? Let's see, er... the knights all filed in, and then the man at the front of the line turned to me and asked me, "Where would the best seats in the house be?" if I recall correctly.

I answered, "Those over there, where you can see the flower beds in the

park,” and pointed to the spot by the window.

“I see. You guys hear that? Leave that table empty!” the man called back to the knights trailing behind him.

It was a mystery to me why they wanted to leave the best seats open, but then he said, “There should be two more people coming in a while—an outrageously attractive man and really cute girl.” Then he asked, “When they get here, could you make sure they sit there?”

That was when I understood that the handsome man was the guest of honor, and that the knights were saving the best seats for him.

I told him I would make sure, and then asked, “Will I know when I see them who the people you’re waiting for are?”

“Yeah, I think you will. There’s not many people who look as good as him.”

“All right, then. I’ll do as you asked.”

I was honestly kind of excited to see someone that gorgeous☆

I had been instructed earlier not to put up any signs saying that the shop has been reserved for a private party, so it got a little tedious having to turn away every customer who wanted to come in. Right after I almost got into a fight with an angry customer arguing that we ‘shoulda put a sign up if we can’t come in!’, the knights stepped in to help me. Thank goodness.

Ah, why don’t you let us put a ‘reserved for private party’ sign? It’s no fun having to turn customers away.

I was starting to think I might put up a sign anyway when I heard someone say, “Oh, there’s already a lot of people in there,” and quickly put on my customer service face. When I turned around, however, I swear I gasped in shock.

Like, I couldn’t help it—the man who was standing there was just so... stunning. It was like Prince Charming had just climbed out of a fairy tale.

“Do you have a table for two?” he asked, as I dumbly stared in admiration that such a person could not only exist but was actually right in front of me. His smile had me absolutely smitten. Even his voice is dreamy, I realized, when his

question yanked me back to reality. I noticed then that there was a cute girl behind him.

It had to be them. I looked around the man just to be sure, and yep, she was definitely cute.

I was so excited to have such a lovely, well-dressed lady in the shop, too! The two of them looked like a pair of dolls, the girl on the man's arm. It felt like I was witnessing a genetic miracle!

Pretending to check to see if we had any open tables, I spotted the man who had given me my instructions earlier. He gave me a subtle nod. These were our guests, no doubt about it.

"Yes, we have seats for two. Right this way, please," I said, leading them to the table we had saved for them.

Even though it wasn't far to the table, the handsome man escorted the lady like it was the most natural thing in the world. I couldn't hold back a smile when I saw. He really cared about her. I was too choked up to be jealous.

What was weird, though, was when everyone there pretended not to recognize the couple and just continued to enjoy their cake and tea. It was like each table had their own non-intervention policy or something. Despite this, they all watched the attractive couple like hawks without saying a thing to them.

It seemed like the only ones who didn't notice were the attractive couple themselves. I wondered what the heck was going on as I joined in on watching them, albeit inconspicuously. They didn't seem like anything other than a pair of people deeply in love.

After a while, though, the couple finally caught on; the man in particular held his head in his hands in exasperation. The young lady was more or less carried off by the pretty older women.

Once everyone revealed themselves, they no longer ignored the couple, and the shop transitioned into a party atmosphere. Orders came flying in one after another, so we ended up just bringing out all the cakes we had!

I continued to observe the couple as we hurriedly brought out cake, tea, and

drinks (we had a small amount of liquor ready, all drinks that went well with sweets). I really couldn't take my eyes off of them for some reason.

Some time later, when it seemed like Mr. Handsome was pestering the cute young lady for some cake, she reluctantly cut off a piece and offered it to him on her fork.

And then! I don't know if she told him to do it, but he ate it directly off her fork!

Almost everyone there gasped when they saw that. I froze, as one does in such a situation.

The happy couple, however, continued on unperturbed. The young lady gazed at Mr. Handsome in awe. He was clearly having fun.

Aaaaahhhh! Thank you, god, for bestowing this gift upon mine eyes!

Everyone unfroze and went back to watching them with grins plastered across their faces, but the couple themselves—completely unaware of what had just occurred around them—just continued to partake of the goodies.

My eyes quickly recovered because they were good looking (it would have been another story if they were ugly), but then, I started to feel like the sappiness I was witnessing was... giving me heartburn? Er, no, that's rude of me to say about customers. Regardless, the way I was able to stare without them realizing it was a true show of skill, I feel.

I found out from the owner later that Mr. Handsome was the so-called 'Fine Duke Fisalis.' I hadn't ever seen him before, only heard the rumors, but I believed the owner. The duke was positively immaculate! His wife, as well—she was so lovely that all I could think was how they were such a perfect couple!

Having seen how diligently the duke watched out for his wife, I fear all I'll ever dream about anymore is finding a man like that for myself!

...Eh? I should throw a private party here myself? To land a man? Well, if I did, I'd want to invite Duke Fisalis☆

Side Story

Blow Your Worries Away!

We were just barely unable to avoid starting a war with Aurantia, the kingdom on our southern border. We still had some time before hostilities broke out in earnest, but there was a heap left for us, the special ops division, to do. We had to complete as much groundwork and investigation into the rapidly changing nation as we could. After the war started for real, on the other hand, we wouldn't actually be all that busy.

At any rate, since I would be away from home for a long time, I needed a way to precisely convey that to Viola. It figured I would have to leave for a campaign just when the distance between us was finally starting to close.

Would I just be pestering her? Is that all this would be?

I had even heard whispers that I'd taken a new lover! And that it was Angelica?! Impossible.

What was that gossipy tradesman going to do to fix that?! When Rohtas had informed me, I clutched at my sword, overcome by the urge to flee in spite of myself. ...I deserve a reward for simply crumpling up a single report.

I couldn't be away from home for so long with this misunderstanding in the air, so I leapt into action to clear my name. I'd find a way to resolve Viola's misunderstanding and then leave for the campaign with a clear mind; having to leave now with this anxiety between us would make for an extremely lonely journey.

"I have to leave again for the south."

"The south?"

"Yes. The situation has deteriorated a bit down there. We've been keeping an eye on it for a long time."

"Really? I had no idea."

"That's understandable—the situation hasn't been made public yet. The only

ones who currently know are the military and the government's top brass."

"And this is an actual campaign, not a business trip?"

"Er, well. It looks like there's been increased activity in that area lately, and considering what we've already gathered from intel..."

"Does this mean there's going to be a war?"

The sparkle in Viola's sapphire blue eyes disappeared when I told her about the campaign, and she trembled in what seemed to be anxiety.

Is she worried about me? I know it's not nice to think like this, but I'd be thrilled if she was.

In that moment, though, I resolved to dispel her worries. I schooled my features so I wouldn't give away how happy I was.

"It's far enough in the future that we can't be sure at this point, but it's rather likely. That's why we're heading down there." *Although, honestly, it's just Aurantia picking a fight, and I wouldn't worry too much about it. It's a real pain in the neck.*

This time around, however, we know based on our current investigation that they're going to come out in pretty large numbers, so we'd be in for a rough time if we confronted them recklessly. We've got to gather all the intel we can and be diligent in our preliminary preparations.

Ugh, I get the feeling this is going to drag on. We have reason to believe that Aurantia has been preparing for a while, so we don't have the luxury of taking our time, but who knows how long it'll take once the fighting actually begins. If Aurantia manages to start an all-out war, it's going to be a hard battle for us, too. If that happens, it might even turn into a drawn-out conflict like the one that forced us to delay our wedding. Great... now I'm worried that I'll have to leave Viola while she's worried.

I unintentionally sighed as I ruminated gloomily over what was to come. When Viola discerned how my expression had darkened, her own features hardened. Her eyes had some fight in them when she gazed back at me. Her sweet face seemed to grant me strength as she stared at me, fists clenched.

Damn it! What a cruel fate it is that drives me so far from her now!

I wrapped my hand around her delicate fist and asked of her, in hopes that it would ease her worry, “Viola, I’m trusting you to look after the place while I’m away. Keep everything nice for me, for when I come back.”

Viola’s eyes widened and she put her hand over her mouth. But I was not expecting what she said next.

“Of course! I’m not alone, after all. I’ve got Rohtas, and Dahlia and Mimosa, Bellis, Cartham, and everyone else, so I’m sure I’ll be fine. We’ll *aaaaaall* look after the manor!” she bluntly replied, smiling.

I’m not exaggerating when I say that, for a split second, it felt like a kick to the chest. I barely kept myself from hanging my head in surrender.

...So, she’ll be fine without me, then. She has the servants, then.

I was speechless. I know she didn’t mean to, but her words really hurt. It must have shown on my face, because Viola’s look intensified, she clenched her fist harder, and followed up with: “I won’t be lonely, I mean. So don’t worry about me, focus on your work instead!”

But it’s so hard for me to leave you! How can you possibly feel that way?!

I’m tearing up a little. I’m... Just a moment.

Does her sense of happiness simply not include me? My presence in her life is only going to grow weaker once I’m away from her and the house. That’s the first step to disappearing completely from someone’s life, right? I can’t imagine a happy life without Viola, but she doesn’t want me in hers? How can that be?!

I felt something inside me snap.

Worry over a drawn-out battle? That won’t be an issue after our brutal training regime. We’ll end it in no time. We’ll show them! We’ll beat them to a pulp!

“Damn it! I can’t let this turn into some drawn-out battle! I’m gonna do whatever it takes to wrap all this up as quickly as possible, so please! Wait for me!” *We won’t be the ones to draw this thing out, at least!*

My long-gone motivation welled up inside me once more, and I let my fighting

spirit shine through as I assured her that the battle would be brief.

I'm coming for you, Aurantia!

—

“Corydalis, where’s the map of Aurantia?”

“Right here,” he replied, handing it to me so I could spread it out on the floor.

We were in a conference room in the special ops department at the Royal Palace. I was earnestly hammering through my work, having decided to do everything in my power as perfectly as possible, in order to keep the battle short and fulfill my promise to Viola. It was a few days before I was to leave for the campaign and time was not on my side.

We would add notes to the map of Aurantia whenever we made contact with them, but even with the decent number of notes we had, it still wasn’t enough. *We need more data. Trails used by animals that would allow us to disappear in the dead of night, secret routes for undercover investigations, escape routes for whenever we might need one...*

“We still don’t have enough detailed information. The info for this area here is old, right? And this area is still blank. Those roads were captured by Aurantia—they’ve laid a trap here. There’s no escape if you’re caught. There should still be a few narrow roads and trails they’re not using,” I said as I pointed to spots on the map.

“Are you for real? This is already pretty in-depth, and you want us to modify it *more*?” Corydalis looked at the map with an expression of disbelief.

You’re not wrong. It is a pretty detailed map, but we need to develop new routes. I swore I’d make this a short war and an easy win. I’ll use any means necessary to lead us to victory!

“Yes. Dispatch three or four people to investigate onsite. After that, make sure everyone has memorized this map,” I told him, pointing to various areas.

“...Even this wasn’t enough for him...” the division members whimpered, tears streaming down their faces as they looked at the map on the floor. They had recorded even the narrowest of village roads, so much so that the lines on

the map looked like a fishing net. But no, the commander still wanted more.

“After adding in the animal trails, the map’s already nearly solid black!”

“Just finding the animal paths was a challenge.”

I could hear their muttered complaints, but didn’t really care.

“Understood,” Corydalis replied defeatedly. *Don’t give me that look.*

“Now that that’s out of the way...”

“What’s next?” he asked as he put the map away.

“Have you noticed a slight uptick in deserters from the Aurantians?”

“Huh?!” Corydalis dropped the map he had just neatly rolled up. I didn’t think it was *that* surprising.

“According to our investigations, it seems as though their attack will fail, and their king and queen won’t take any sort of action. So wouldn’t you think that would lead to an increase in dissatisfaction among the people?” I explained my reasoning behind my instructions.

“Definitely.”

“If the numbers of people newly willing to cooperate are on the rise, that’s in our favor.”

“True.”

“So I want you to come up with a plan to convince more Aurantian citizens to come over to our side.”

“...Understood.”

“Targeting people with military connections would be best, I think.”

“For Pete’s sake! Why does he keep raising the bar...?!”

“Did you say something, Corydalis?”

“No, not a word,” the lieutenant commander fibbed, looking off to the side.

I sent him off before turning to the other order members.

“I assume you all want this meaningless war to be over with soon, too. You’ll

need to give me one-hundred-ten percent in order to achieve that. Show me what you've got, today," I told them, looking over their faces.

"...It seems like the one who wants this over the most is the commander."

"For sure," Corydalis mumbled.

Cue more audible whispering.

"Did someone say something?"

"No, not a word."

"That's what I thought. I take it you have no objections, then. Go and get started."

"...Yes, sir. Seriously, though, this is brutal. Honest to god *brutal*. I mean, I get wanting to finish the war quickly, but we've already been providing pretty darn accurate intel. The man says he wants more, though. ...Ugh, there's no point in going on about it, though. Uh, let's just do our best, I guess. So, everyone stop your whining and select members for your missions."

"Yes, sir!" the order members responded.

I watched as Corydalis and the others, with Corydalis still grumbling under his breath, left the conference room before picking up one of the many papers piled on my desk. *Now to summarize all the information we've gathered. I'll look it over carefully so I can come up with the most effective strategy.*

I, for one, found engrossing myself in my work delightful.

"...And then later, there should be some new intel coming in to work with."

A few hours after the meeting:

I had worked my way through the thick stacks of paper and finally had a clear desk. From them, I had worked out the best possible plan.

Er, I may need to rework it depending on the new intel, but for the time being, it's the best. Having this plan eases my worries about the war considerably. All that's left now is finding a way to make sure Viola never forgets about me! I need to give her something to remember me by for the period I'll be away! Not that there's anything wrong with her quiet, relaxed life around the manor, but it

lacks impact.

What if I took her on another outing?

I feel like I made a lot of mistakes on our last date, but this time around, I've reflected on them and I can come up with all sorts of plans.

As far as what the servants told me goes, Viola likes humble, simple things. I wonder if she'd like just a carefree walk around the capital, then? I've never done such a thing, though, so I'm clueless about what sort of shops we should stop at.

Should I ask Corydalis? No, he'd just make it into a new joke. I need to stop asking him things altogether.

What about Celosia? No, his tastes are basically the same as mine, so there'd be no point.

I could ask one of the other knights, maybe, I thought, deciding right then to go and take a break. On the way to the break room where we often gathered, I spotted several women who worked in the chivalric order offices headed toward me down the hall. They look to be about Viola's age, maybe a couple of years older. That's it! I bet their tastes are closer to Viola's than any of the knights. Maybe I should ask them. I know that some of the female staff are from the noble class, but by and large, most of them live common lives.

Realizing this, I made my way over to them and began to bombard them with questions.

"May I ask you ladies something?" I motioned to them.

"Commander Fisalis!" one of them gasped, managing to give a proper salute despite her surprise at my sudden question.

"If you're in the middle of something important, I can ask another time, but do any of you happen to know what stores around the capital are popular with young women right now?"

"Huh?"

"Popular stores. Around the capital?"

"Um..."

Their surprise was visible in their eyes; they'd probably never expected me to ask them a question like that.

"...Let's see. Lemon Myrtle's Confectionary is probably the most popular," one of the women replied after a moment of thought, placing her finger on her lip.

"Everything they make is absolutely delicious. There's always a huge line."

"It's no fun waiting in line, but the flavor of their food is definitely worth it," two others added.

"I see. Thank you," I replied in gratitude.

"Sorry we couldn't give you a better answer!" they all said.

I gave them a little bow before leaving them.

Hmm. Lemon Myrtle's, huh? I made a mental note of that.

"That went well. I'll see if I can find anyone else to ask." *It's no wonder intel gathering is my forte. They'll all see my true power now!*

Little did I know, but the office workers behind me had timidly crept away, whispering, 'Show us what now?', 'That's the second time he's made me jump now', and 'What's he planning on doing with the information we gave him?'

Also, I didn't realize it at the time, but the fact that I'd suddenly started approaching women I'd never spoken to before provoked some wild speculation amongst the staff. This led to an emergency gossip session, as their desire for answers reached fever pitch.

The day I was to leave for the campaign came at last.

I had gone on another date with Viola (which she really seemed to like!) through which I was sure I had successfully burned myself into her memory. It felt like a full-body refresh for both of us.

Still, I worried that I would eventually run out of juice on the war front in Viola's absence, so I told her, "I'd really like some handmade handkerchiefs from you. I think they'll help maintain my morale, and I'd keep them on me the entire time." I was referring to the ones she had made shortly after we were married. I recalled that they were incredibly well made.

But why did she do that? Or a better question would be, why was I such a jerk when I first moved back into the main house? I'm sorry, Viola!

"Handkerchiefs? Sure," Viola readily agreed. She then made me two dozen.

I want to have some spares—not because I plan on letting them get dirty, but because I want to display them!

I'd finished all the prep work to be done in the capital. My subordinates did excellently, too, in my opinion. In fact, they made so many additions to the map of Aurantia that it was all black, and we had to rush out an enlarged version. They really did give me one-hundred-ten percent!

"Time to roll out! Let's make this as short as possible!" I leapt onto my horse with renewed determination, his black coat shining in the sun.

"About that. I'm already exhausted, so I'd like to go home as soon as possible."

"Same here," agreed the rest of my knights.

"What was that?"

"Nothing! Let's all work our hardest so we can come home early! Huzzah!" they quickly backpedaled before giving a war cry and spurring their horses into a gallop.

I was deep in thought as various foliage and fauna rapidly passed us by. We were able to sufficiently prepare for the war. I'd strengthened my bonds to Viola. Or at least, I thought so. I was pretty sure that I had been able to calm her worries. All that remained was to execute my plans.

I'll end this war in no time at all!



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Can Someone Please Explain What’s Going On?! Volume 3

by Tsuredurebana

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A vibrant anime-style illustration of a wedding scene. In the center, a young man with brown hair in a dark blue suit with gold embroidery and a young woman with long pink hair in a pink dress stand together. To the left, a blonde woman in a purple dress and a brown-haired woman in a green dress look on. To the right, a silver-haired woman in a teal dress claps. The background features a large building with arched windows and large orange flowers in the top left. The bottom is decorated with yellow and pink flowers.

CAN SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON?!

3 ~A Sign-on-the-Line Wedding Story~

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